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NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

**CAR TALK: ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN
THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC**

by

Evan M. Wieczorek

December 2017

Thesis Advisor:
Second Reader:

Jessica Piombo
Rachel Sigman

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE			<i>Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188</i>	
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instruction, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188) Washington, DC 20503.				
1. AGENCY USE ONLY (Leave blank)		2. REPORT DATE December 2017		3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED Master's thesis
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE CAR TALK: ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC			5. FUNDING NUMBERS	
6. AUTHOR(S) Evan M. Wiczorek				
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, CA 93943-5000			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING /MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) N/A			10. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER	
11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government. IRB number ____N/A____.				
12a. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release. Distribution is unlimited.			12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE	
13. ABSTRACT (maximum 200 words) This thesis examines the prioritization of religious identity among Central Africans in the wake of the 2013 Séléka crisis. Before the Séléka came to power, ethnicity was the identity that had the most political salience in the Central African Republic. During the crisis, religious identity was prioritized over all others. This thesis researched a number of possible causes of this identity shift, from the agendas of domestic and foreign politics to mass-level tensions and demographic changes. This thesis argues that the prioritization of religious identity over ethnic identity among Central Africans is an example of an elite-driven identity change. After being driven from power, southern political elites mobilized Christianity in response to the Séléka takeover because it was an identity the majority of southern Central Africa could rally behind.				
14. SUBJECT TERMS Central African Republic, identity, ethnicity, religion, identity shifts			15. NUMBER OF PAGES 79	
			16. PRICE CODE	
17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT Unclassified	18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE Unclassified	19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT Unclassified	20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	

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**CAR TALK: ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN THE CENTRAL
AFRICAN REPUBLIC**

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Captain, United States Air Force
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS IN SECURITY STUDIES
(MIDDLE EAST, SOUTH ASIA, SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA)**

from the

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the prioritization of religious identity among Central Africans in the wake of the 2013 Séléka crisis. Before the Séléka came to power, ethnicity was the identity that had the most political salience in the Central African Republic. During the crisis, religious identity was prioritized over all others. This thesis researched a number of possible causes of this identity shift, from the agendas of domestic and foreign politics to mass-level tensions and demographic changes. This thesis argues that the prioritization of religious identity over ethnic identity among Central Africans is an example of an elite-driven identity change. After being driven from power, southern political elites mobilized Christianity in response to the Séléka takeover because it was an identity the majority of southern Central Africa could rally behind.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Jessica Piombo and Dr. Rachel Sigman for all their help and patience while guiding me through this process. I would also like to thank Dr. Thomas Brehm, Major Paul Bryan, and Captain Ben Swan for their help getting me into the Naval Postgraduate School. Finally, I would like to thank Kindle, who made being stationed on the opposite coast from all my friends and family bearable.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

The political history of the Central African Republic is a complex and violent one. Since independence in 1960, with two exceptions, the heads of state in the Central African Republic have come to power via a coup. By the third coup, political elites increasingly began to rely upon their own ethnic groups to provide them with the fighters needed to take and maintain power, while the group was rewarded with state resources.¹ This many-spoked wheel was smashed in March 2013, when a motley group of fighters, known as the Séléka, from the predominantly Muslim northeast part of the Central African Republic gained control of the capital and overthrew the government of François Bozizé, whose ethnic group hails from the southern part of the country.²

The northeast of the Central African Republic, long ignored by almost every head of state, had never before had one of their own in a position of real power in the central government. Interestingly, around the time of the Séléka's rise to power, a shift happened in the Central African Republic's politics. Religious identity, previously secondary to ethnic identity, became the most important identifier in mobilizing political support in the Central African Republic.³ Never before had elites in the Central African Republic expressed their goals in religious language. Tracing the cause (or causes) of this dramatic change in the Central African Republic's politics will be the subject of this research. Specifically: What caused religious identity to supplant ethnic identity as the main political mobilizer in the Central African Republic during and after the Séléka crisis?

This thesis argues the shift in religious identity was defensive in nature and was caused by southern Christian Central African political elites. Christian elites had ruled the country from independence until the Séléka's 2013 take over. However, the region where

¹ International Crisis Group, "Central African Republic: Anatomy of a Phantom State," Africa Report N230, (Brussels: ICG Publishing, 2007): 5, http://old.crisisgroup.org/_/media/Files/africa/central-africa/central-african-republic/230-central-african-republic-the-roots-of-violence.pdf.

² International Crisis Group, "Anatomy of a Phantom State," 3.

³ Natalie Dukhan, *The Central African Republic Crisis*, (Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, 2016): 1, http://www.gsdr.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/CAR_Jan2016.pdf.

the Séléka originated meant the overwhelming majority of the group's fighters were Muslims, though they did not mobilize an Islamic identity. In response to their removal, these Christian elites capitalized on preexisting tensions and differences between Muslims and Christians in order to remove the Séléka from power by isolating them from potential support, as the overwhelming majority of Central Africans in the south are Christians.

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Africa as a whole is rarely on the minds of many American policy makers and practitioners. In Africa, the United States often follows the lead of former colonial administrators and regional leaders before responding to a crisis.⁴ The Central African Republic is no different. The United States often follows France's lead. Yet the Central African Republic's geography makes it critical to the stability of the whole of Central Africa. Over the decades, the Central African Republic's porous borders have allowed armed groups from its neighbors to cross in and out of the Central African Republic on the way to other objectives. The Central African Republic saw fighters using the area as a base of operations and recruitment during both the conflicts in Darfur and in what is now South Sudan.⁵ At other times, Sudanese-backed groups have gone from the Central African Republic into Chad to conduct attacks against Idriss Déby's regime.⁶ Both the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and armed groups from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have operated in the southern region of the CAR.⁷ The United States has devoted much effort and treasure to encouraging a stable Sahel and DRC. Without an understanding of the situation in the Central African Republic, both of those goals are unlikely to be attained.

⁴ Peter Schraeder, *United States Foreign Policy Toward Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 14.

⁵ Jennifer Giroux, David Lanz, and, Damiano Sguaitamatti, "The Tormented Triangle: The Regionalization of the Conflict in Sudan, Chad and the Central African Republic," *Crisis States Working Paper* (2009), accessed 26 March 2017, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/28497/1/WP47.2.pdf>.

⁶ Giroux, Lanz, Sguaitamatti, "The Tormented Triangle," 3.

⁷ International Crisis Group, "Central African Republic: The Roots of Violence," Africa Report N230, (Brussels: ICG Publishing, 2007): 4, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/230-central-african-republic-the-roots-of-violence.pdf>.

Not only do events of the Séléka crisis have geopolitical ramifications, but academically this thesis will fit into the established field of ethnic studies. There has been much written about ethnic identity in both politics, generally, as well as in armed conflict. Though identities wax and wane throughout a person's life for various reasons, it is not common for an entire country to mobilize somewhat dormant identities. This thesis, however, will study an identity that went from being mostly quiet and never before particularly relevant politically to one that literally meant the difference between life and death.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to fully explore this question there are a number of terms to be defined and theories to be discussed first, starting with ethnicity and ethnic identity. Without a firm starting point, it would be difficult to discuss how identity shifts. From there, the conversation will turn to linkages between ethnic and religious identities, showing that religious identities can be used in very nearly identical ways as ethnic labels. Once the foundational ideas have been laid, this literature review will then end with a discussion of theories that explain why identities shift or change over time.

This thesis uses Kanchan Chandra's definition of ethnicity, in which ethnicity is "a subset of categories in which descent based attributes are necessary for membership."⁸ These attributes are given by one's parents. They include physical features, religion, sect, language, tribe, clan, race, nationality, region, and caste.⁹ Kanchan's definition is useful for multiple reasons. First, it is widely used in the field. Second, the three attributes of religion, language, and tribe, specifically, are critical to this thesis' study of the Central African Republic. Third, in the periods before and after the Séléka crisis, divisions along specifically religious, lingual, or tribal lines can be found.

This does not mean that identities are singular or static. Over the course of a person's life, the primary identity that defines her will likely wax and wane in importance

⁸ Kanchan Chandra, "Introduction" in *Constructivist Theories of Ethnic Politics*, ed. Kanchan Chandra (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) 9.

⁹ Kanchan Chandra, "What Is Ethnic Identity?" in *Constructivist Theories of Ethnic Politics*, ed. Kanchan Chandra (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) 63.

or even change entirely. Beverly Crawford suggests that all identities, at first, are merely cultural, in that they are not used for political mobilization. However, these cultural identities become politicized when members of a given group feel their group is being discriminated against or another group is being given special privileges. This is particularly true during times of economic hardship.¹⁰ Some argue that identities politicize the fastest when the state is specifically seen as part of the problem for acting unjustly, and when politics is seen as zero-sum.¹¹

Similarly, to understand identity, it is important to note that not only can identities harden and soften over time, they can shift or even completely change as well. We can imply from the lengthy list of attributes set forth by Kanchan that everyone has multiple identities. For instance, this author may be considered “White” in a room with people of various racial backgrounds, “Polish” in a room of white Americans, and “Christian” in yet another room, but they are all identities into which he was born. Chandra refers to every identity a person possesses (i.e. White, Christian, Polish) as nominal identities. The identity that a person goes by (whether they chose it for themselves or society dictated said identity) is their activated identity.¹² This research will focus on the reasoning behind deactivating certain identities and activating others in the Central African Republic.

This thesis will consider ethnicity and religion on roughly the same footing. This may strike some as odd since theoretically this author could convert to Islam, but he could not make himself an Irish-American. While ethnicity may seem a firmer identity than religion, both can affect an individual’s preferences or behavior, and as the existence of both ethnic and religious political parties throughout the world can attest to, both can be politically salient. This thesis is focused on the reasons that a given identity shifts, not

¹⁰ Beverly Crawford, “The Causes of Cultural Conflict: An Institutional Approach,” in *The Myth of Ethnic Conflict*, eds. Beverly Crawford and Ronnie Lipschutz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998): 5; Paul R. Brass, “Ethnic Groups and Ethnic Identity Formation,” in Hutchinson and Smith eds. *Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996): 87.

¹¹ See: Bert Klandermans, “How Group Identification Helps to Overcome the Dilemma of Collective Action,” *The American Behavioral Scientist*, (2002), 891; Richard Jackson, “Violent Internal Conflict and the African State: Toward a Framework of Analysis,” *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* (2010), 29–52, accessed on 15 February 2017, doi: 10.1080/0258900012014044.

¹² Kanchan, “What Is Ethnic Identity?” 58.

on the nuances of different identities. As such, ethnicity and religion will be treated as equal (albeit, different) identities.

Religion in the Central African Republic may potentially be used more like what Duncan McDuie-Ra would refer to as an “adjacent identity,” a more general identity that can be used to signal shared experiences with similar groups. Typically, these adjacent identities are created in response to an exogenous political or social phenomenon. A classic example of this would be Iroquois, Sioux, and Apache tribes--who had only limited interaction, if at all--referring to themselves collectively as “Native Americans” following their similar experiences during the European colonial period and subsequent American westward expansion.¹³ Some would argue that adjacent identities that are manifested in routine practices (such as religion) can trump identities received by birth (such as ethnicity).¹⁴ Whether that is the case or not, most scholars agree that religion as an adjacent identity can reinforce other group distinctions and can aide mobilizers both internally and externally.¹⁵

Now that the fact that identities can shift or change has been established, it is important to discuss what causes that shift. According to Jennifer Todd, there are three factors to consider when analyzing a shift in identity: existing identities structures, power relations, and resources.¹⁶ The first two categories deal with the socio-political dynamics of a given society. A Catholic’s inability to get a job in certain career fields or harassment by security services in Northern Ireland may encourage her to begin to identify herself as “British,” for example. The third category may come into play when things like access to

¹³ Duncan McDuie-Ra, “Adjacent Identities in Northeast India,” *Asian Identities* 17, no. 3 (October 2015): 401. doi: 10.1080/14631369.2015.1091654.

¹⁴ Jillian Schwedler, “Islamic Identity: Myth, Menace, or Mobilizer?” *SAIS Review* 21, no. 2 (July 2001): 14.

¹⁵ Monica D. Toft, “Religion, Civil War, and International Order,” *BCSIA Discussion Papers*, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University (2006): 1; Alexander De Juan, “A Pact with the Devil? Elite Alliances as Bases of Violent Religious Conflict,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2008):, accessed on 20 April 2017, doi: 10.1080/1075610080233193; Basdau Matthias, Vullers, Johannes, Korner Peter, “What Drives Inter-Religious Violence? Lessons from Nigeria, Cote d’Ivoire and Tanzania,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (2013), doi: 10.1080/1057510X.2013.82376.

¹⁶ Jennifer Todd, “Social transformation, collective categories, and identity change,” *Theory and Society* 15, no. 1 (January 2005): 452.

land in agrarian societies or welfare services in more developing countries are rationed or distributed based on identity quotas.

While Todd's factors may explain some of the underlying pressures on individuals surrounding identity change, they do not explain specific paths through which identities are created or change. James Fearon and David Laitin give three, not mutually exclusive, pathways to identity change: broad social and economic structural forces, discourse with other groups, or construction by individual agents.¹⁷ The first category includes a number of macrohistorical forces. Benedict Anderson's work exemplifies this category in his assertion that mass literacy helps create identity because it allows for a unified system of communication, an ability to build a long-term image of the community, and the dying out of weaker dialects.¹⁸ Another example is how the colonial era led to the creation of numerous identities in the Western Hemisphere, as people emigrated away from Europe. Although convincing, this line of argument does not explain the creation of every identity nor why some forces are more potent than others.

The second category, discourse, is when a group uses symbolic or cultural systems to separate themselves from another group. Abner Cohen supports this notion when he notes, specifically with regard to ethnic identity, "contemporary ethnicity is the result of intensive interaction between ethnic groupings and not the result of complete separatism."¹⁹ Symbols and myths are either invented or given more importance within the community in order to advance the overall "story" of the group. An example of this is how Jews invented the Bat Mitzvah ceremony for girls in the twentieth century or have given increased importance to the week of Chanukah, as the prevalence and commercialization of Christmas, also in December, increased in the United States and

¹⁷ James D. Fearon, and David D. Laitin, "Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity," *International Organization* (2000), 851.

¹⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York, Verso, 1993), 44–45; Stephen Van Evera, *APSA-CP Newsletter*, PR 31, (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Press, 2001), http://comparativenewsletter.com/files/archived_newsletters/2001_winter.pdf.

¹⁹ Abner Cohen, "Ethnicity and Politics," in *Ethnicity*, ed. John Hutchinson, and Andrew Smith, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 84.

Europe.²⁰ This category is open to questions of why some traditions and customs have endured and why others have not.²¹

The third category, construction by individual agents, occurs at both the elite and mass levels. At the elite level, there are numerous reasons to encourage ethnic thinking. Paul Brass lays out four specific situations of elite conflict (violent or political) that will encourage the development of ethnicity: a) a local aristocracy attempting to maintain privilege against a foreign conqueror, b) religious elites competing other religious elites from different ethnic groups for power and influence, c) religious elites contending with a domestic aristocracy within a single ethnic group, or d) a competition between domestic religious elites and an foreign aristocracy.²² Others argue that identity mobilization results not from conflict but from the fact that it is a more efficient medium through which elites can express their message. Patrick Glazer and Daniel Moynihan note for example, that it is easier for politicians to prove that they are working to improve the lives of people who generally live in a specific region, such as Scots, than it is to do the same for diverse set of people, such as the workers of the United Kingdom who face a more diverse set of problems and challenges.²³ Whether the impetus for ethnic mobilization is the result of elite conflict or calculation, the theories on their own do not adequately address why the masses go along with the attempts at mobilization.

Whether elite action is a result of conflict or convenience there is a school of thought that bridges this debate by saying these actions are the results of incentives from institutions. These types of arguments typically center around the system of government in a given state. Some argue that the features of federalism, separate governments at the national, state/provincial, and local levels, encourage elites to mobilize ethnic consciousness, especially if an ethnic group is geographically concentrated at the

²⁰ Herbt J. Gans,, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (1979), 10, accessed on 24 May 2017 doi:10.1080/01419870.1979.9993248.

²¹ Fearon and Laitin, "Violence and Social Construction," 853.

²² Brass, "Ethnic Groups and Ethnic Identity Formation," 89.

²³ Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan, Introduction, in *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 9.

subnational levels of government.²⁴ The logic behind these arguments is that federalism allows localities more autonomy in things such as education, customs, security, etc. and this encourages ethnic groups to think of themselves separately from the rest of the country. That in turn encourages further hardening of the ethnic identity.

Another grouping of elite-led literature focuses less on the structures of a given state and more on pressures acting on the elite class. During periods of political transition, elites will use whatever tools are available to them to hold on to (or increase) their power. Mobilizing ethnic nationalism can be a convenient way for elites to maintain their popularity while not giving into democratic headwinds.²⁵ In ethnically primed societies, the ability to say the ethnic group is being led by coethnics and not outsiders may be enough to satisfy the masses instead of implementing true democratic practices. However, it is not necessarily ethnic identity that will be mobilized during these transitions. The elites draw on whatever identity gives them access to enough support to maintain or win power.²⁶ In multiethnic societies, this may require activating secondary or adjacent identities and bringing them into the forefront.

Conversely, some argue that elites are not on the forefront but are dragged along by the people who are the true drivers of identity changes. At the mass level Fearon and Laitin argue “members of marginalized categories or individual dissidents may quietly or loudly contest common assumptions about particular categories. Their actions may then result in the construction of new or altered identities, which may change cultural boundaries.”²⁷ People profess a given identity and their collective behavior is a self-reinforcing system, which ensures they are different from other groups. Others might

²⁴ Nancy Bermeo, “A New Look at Federalism: The Import of Institutions,” *The Journal of Democracy* (2002), 110; Monica D. Toft, *The Geography of Ethnic Violence* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), 22; Henry Hale, “Divided We Stand: Institutional Sources of Ethnofederal Survival and Collapse,” *World Politics* (2004): 175.

²⁵ Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 36; V.P. Gagon, “Serbia’s Road to War,” in *Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict and Democracy*, ed. Diamond, Larry and Plattner, Marc F (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press: 2003), 117.

²⁶ Jessie Piombo, *Institutions, Ethnicity, and Political Mobilization in South Africa* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009) 3.

²⁷ Fearon and Laitin, “Violence and Social Construction,” 853.

argue, however, that the masses will not take up the mantle of ethnicity unless they have been primed by the state institutions to value ethnic identity. These institutions are not specific as they could be elections, representation, security services, etc., but they must have some identity dynamic (i.e., an army with a mandated ethnic composition).²⁸ Jennifer Todd takes this argument one step further saying that not only does society need to be primed but also that either power relations between groups need to change or an imbalance in resource distribution.²⁹ Without one of the latter two situations society will feel no pressure to mobilize politically as an identity group.

Somewhat ignored by authors on shifting identity (though not necessarily excluded from theories such as Fearon's and Laitin's) is the role of missionaries and conversion efforts on identity shifts. This is particularly germane in African contexts where both Christianity and Islam are becoming increasingly political over the decades. In regards to Islam, specifically, there has been a noted increase in Islamic proselytization across the globe from Saudi Arabian religious authorities. Three factors helped start this trend: the politicization of Wahhabism following interaction with Muslim Brotherhood members moving to Saudi Arabia, the increase in Saudi revenues following Saudi Aramco's agreement to split profits with the kingdom in the late 1950s, and massive guest worker programs in most Gulf countries that exposed said workers to a conservative form of Islam.³⁰ These Islamic missionaries spread a very conservative and political form of Islam that encourages followers to pressure their governments to espouse Islamic principles. Sebastian Elischer's research showed sharp increases in Islamic terrorism in countries where the governments did not co-opt or suppress Muslim religious authorities early on.³¹ Although this thesis does not deal with terrorism directly, his research would suggest the potential for politicization of Islamic identity if it is not coopted by the government early on. Similarly, there has also been a noted increase in evangelical membership on the continent as a whole which most link to recent missionary

²⁸ Crawford, "The Causes of Cultural Conflict," 10.

²⁹ Jennifer Todd, "Social Transformation, Collective Categories, and Identity Change," 452

³⁰ Daniel W. Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 286–287.

³¹ Sebastian Elischer, "Governing the Faithful: State Management of Salafi Activity in the Sahel and East Africa," (paper presented at Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, 25 April 2017).

efforts by American churches.³² Evangelical Christianity also tends to be conservative and to a certain extent political. It is possible that either or both of these trends have had an effect on identity in the Central African Republic.

D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

This thesis began with four hypotheses. The first hypothesis supposed that after years of political and economic isolation that ethnic groups of the northeast region coalesced around Islam as an adjacent identity. They then formed the Séléka to install a government friendlier to Muslims and their home region. This hypothesis correctly assessed Central Africans living in the northeast do feel a sense of isolation from the rest of the country. However, as this thesis will show, the Séléka not frame its goals in Islamic rhetoric and was not caused by increased salience in Islamic identity.

The second hypothesis was that changing religious demographics within the Central African Republic led to a more politicized religious landscape that encourages inter-religious strife. Specifically, the author researched influence of Salafi Islam and Pentecostal Christian sects as they are prevalent throughout the region and are overtly political. This this will show that, while the presence of Pentecostal Churches specifically played a minor role, these factors are intervening variables in the politicization of religious identity.

The third hypothesis investigated the role domestic elites played in the prioritization of religious over ethnic identity. Specifically, Southern ethnic elites and entrepreneurs saw prioritizing Christian identity as the most useful strategy for them to gain power and influence in the face of the regime installed by the Muslim Séléka. This hypothesis became the thesis of this work. In the Central African Republic there are almost a dozen different ethnic groups, some of which can be further reduced into subgroups. But the ones in the southern part of the country have one feature that cuts

³² Wes Granberg-Michaelson, "Think Christianity Is Dying? No, Christianity Is Shifting," *Washington Post*, accessed 4 May 2017 https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/05/20/think-christianity-is-dying-no-christianity-is-shifting-dramatically/?utm_term=.503d2da1dfb7; Or: Pew Research Center, "Global Christianity – A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population," <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>, accessed 4 May 2017.

across these cleavages: Christianity. A Christian identity would allow elites vying to retake the capital from the Séléka to draw resources and men from a larger pool to use in their war effort.

The fourth and final hypothesis looked at the role of the neighboring states, specifically Chad and their role in the rise of the Séléka. Chad is a predominantly Muslim country and its leader, Idriss Déby, frequently meddles in Central African affairs in order to maintain influence over the ruling regime. This this will show that the Déby Regime did play a role in the rise of the Séléka. However, shift prioritization of religious identity was a defensive decision by southern Central African elites and not as tool used by the Séléka. Thus Déby's influence is another intervening variable in the story.

E. RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis consists of a single case study: The Central African Republic in the years immediately before, during, and after the Séléka crisis. A single case allowed for more empirically nuanced analysis of the events in the Central African Republic. A single case study also allowed the author to come to more practical, less theoretical conclusions as comparisons to a second case most certainly would have required more generalization.

Though this thesis studied religious and identity mobilization in the Central African Republic during the Séléka crisis, that is not to say that all religious identities and mobilization were pertinent to this effort. Besides Christians and Muslims there are also a number of Animists in the country. How the crisis has affected their identity (if at all), remains outside the scope of this research because animism has not been used for large-scale political mobilization. Similarly, there are ethnic groups that live in the southeastern portion of the country but not only are they relatively small and isolated but also historically they have not played a major role in any of the political turmoil seen in the country. The main concern of this research will be the Christian and Muslim identities found in northeast, south central, and southwestern portions of the country.

The dearth of academic pieces written about the Central African Republic, especially in English, and an inability to travel to the country meant this thesis drew heavily from humanitarian, nonprofit, and international governmental organizations that

are operating in country or in the region. The major players in these categories, Human Rights Watch, the United Nations, and the International Crisis Group.

F. THESIS OVERVIEW

This thesis is broken up into five chapters. The second chapter provides historical and religious context. It shows how demographics dictated elites mobilize ethnicity of religion until the Séléka took power with foreign assistance. The third chapter discusses enabling factors that allowed elites to capitalize on preexisting tensions between Central African religious groups once the conditions on the ground allowed for them. The fourth chapter shows elite response to the Séléka takeover and how the politicization of religious identity became the norm. The sixth and final chapter discusses the implications of this thesis and relevance for the United States Department of Defense.

II. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

This chapter will provide important context for the remaining of the thesis. It will start by discussing the political history of the Central African Republic. It will note three eras of political conflict. The first era lasted from independence until the early 1980s and did not feature identity as a particularly important tool in political mobilization. The second era begins in the early 1980s and ends with Séléka crisis in 2013. In this period, ethnic identity was frequently used by elites in political mobilization. The final period, from 2013 to the present, features religious identity as the main axis Central Africans mobilize along and only happened when southern, Christian elites were totally removed from power.

After discussing these historical events, this chapter will turn to laying out the religious demographics and trends found in the Central African Republic. The religious demographics help explain why religion was not mobilized until the Séléka's power grab created the political opportunity, and these religious trends explain some of the framing processes that were available once the mobilization did happen.

A. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Before the Séléka Rebellion, the role identity played in politics waxed and waned. At times identity was critical and at other times it was rather meaningless. Identity, of any kind, was not mobilized for political gain by elites until the nearly 15-year presidency of Andre Kolingba began in 1981. Once identity mobilization became common in Central African politics a distinct pattern developed. To take power, political elites find support in other ethnic groups and regions. This required mobilizing identities the crossed cleavages, usually regional identities. This allowed them cast a wider net in an effort to gain more support than the regime in power. Once in power, the new regime slowly parred down its coalition to familial and ethnic ties in order to efficient distribute the sources of patronage previously discussed to their closest supporters.

1. Early History and Independence

The Central African Republic sits in the Congo River Basin, with the Ubangi River, a tributary of the Congo, making up the majority of the country's southern border. Savannah grasslands cover a majority of the country with the exceptions of tropical rainforests found in the southwest and the Sahel-like northeast. These climatic differences influenced differences of occupation and lifestyle between the people that became Central African. In the south, people traditionally farmed or fished. The farther one goes northeast in the country, the more farming gives way to cattle raising and the importance of the Arab trade and slave networks were.

The French first arrived to what is now the Central African Republic in the 1880s. They hoped to expand their colonial holdings from West Africa to the Indian Ocean but were blocked by the British and settled with Ubangi-Shari, as territory was then called, as their eastern most colony. Considering it *la colonie poubelle*—the trashcan colony—because of its lack of development, inaccessibility, and numerous small-scale slave-raiding sultanates, the French largely privatized control of the colony for the first few decades. In exchange for a fee, the French government gave firms free reign to extract what resources they could. The government would step in whenever missionaries complained about the abuses committed by agents of the companies too loudly. However, control of the colony was largely a private affair for many years.

When European powers drew what would become the modern borders of Africa, they unknowingly set up an important dynamic of the Central African Republic. The northeast portion of the country is much different from the rest of the country. Historically, the people living in the region have closer cultural and economic links to the ethnic groups in what is now Chad and Sudan than they do their southern Central African counterparts. For example, the majority of Central Africans from the northeast predominately speak Sudanese Arabic while the majority of southern speak Sango, the official language of the Central African Republic. As might be implied, the majority of southern Central Africans are Christian, while the majority of those in the northeast are Muslim. This is largely for two reasons. First, because during the rainy season the area becomes a marsh and is nearly inaccessible by ground to the south. What little

development the French during the colonial era did not include paving roads to the northeast.³³ Second, many ethnic groups in southern Central African Republic put as much distance as possible between themselves and the northeast for fear of slave raiding. With the capital city Bangui firmly in the southeast, southerners had little reason throughout history to look to the northeast.

Since independence in 1960, the Central African Republic's history has never seen much political stability. Of the nine people who have been the Central African Republic's head of the state, six took power in coups.³⁴ Only two came to power through democratic elections. The constant violent turnover of the government has hampered the development of state institutions and the economy as a whole. For example, a country of 630,000 square miles has less than 24,000 kilometers of roads, of which only around 700 kilometers are hard surface (Ukraine, a country roughly the same size has seven times as many miles of road, almost all of which is hard surface).³⁵ Largely because of this, government influence does not extend much farther than the capital.

This is not to say that no leaders of the country never tried to develop the economy. Colonel Jean-Bedel Bokassa, who took power from the first President, David Dacko, in 1965, in a somewhat bloodless coup (Bokassa personally stabbed a rival to death with his ceremonial sabre³⁶) was one of them. He launched massive educational programs and sought to increase agricultural exports. Though Bokassa personally embezzled state funds, he did not tolerate others doing so and the civil service under him was competent and efficient.³⁷ Eventually his largess and increasing authoritarian leanings (in 1976, he enthroned himself the Emperor of the Central African Empire)

³³ Michael J. Brown, Marie-Joelle Zahar, "Social Cohesion as Peacebuilding in the Central African Republic," *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* (2015), 16.

³⁴ Martin Meredith. 2005. *The Fate of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books), 206.

³⁵ Robert Klosowicz, "The Central African Republic: A Portrait of a Collapsed State After Last Rebellion," *African Studies* (2016). 37.

³⁶ Stephen W. Smith, "CAR's History: The Past of a Tense Present," in *Making Sense of the Central African Republic*, eds. Tatiana Carayannis and Louisa Lombard (London, UK: Zed Books, 2015), 26.

³⁷ Laurence D. Wohlers, "A Central African Elite Perspective on the Struggles of the Central African Republic," in *Making Sense of the Central African Republic*, eds. Tatiana Carayannis and Louisa Lombard (London, UK: Zed Books, 2015), 306.

infuriated audiences at home and abroad. The final straw broke in April 1979, when police killed dozens of students protesting Bokassa's regime. Later that year France organized and led a coup reinstalling his predecessor, David Dacko.

Dacko lasted only a few years in his position. He relied heavily on a French secret service agent named Jean-Claude Manton, who quite literally ran the country for Dacko.³⁸ Political insiders and laymen began to protest what had essentially become a return to colonial rule. After he narrowly won a French-arranged plebiscite on his return to power by less than .25 percent, Dacko, fearing a future coup, turned power over to Army Chief of Staff, General Andre Kolingba.

2. Mobilization of Ethnic Identity Among Southern Elites

The Kolingba regime marked an important turn in the political history of the Central African Republic. Previously, ethnic identity did not mean much politically. The trading language Sango was popular in the area even before the French arrived somewhat blunting the differences between ethnic groups.³⁹ During the colonial era, France encouraged Sango even further as they saw it as easier than instituting French on en masse. Bokassa strongly encouraged a Central African identity, not allowing ethnicity to influence the civil or security services. This all changed when Manton foiled a coup attempt by former Prime Minister Ange-Félix Patassé and Generals Francois Bozizé and Alphonse Mbaikoua.⁴⁰ The three plotters managed to escape capture.

Following the coup, Kolingba dispatched two coethnic—Yakoma—generals on punitive expeditions to the home regions of the conspirators. The expeditions raided towns, razed villages, and massacred hundreds of people.⁴¹ Animosity from Patassé's Sara-Kaba ethnic group toward Kolingba and the Yakoma lasted decades. Paranoia of future coup attempts caused Kolingba to stack both the regular army officer corps and the

³⁸ Smith, "CAR's History," 29.

³⁹ Louisa Lombard, *State of Rebellion: Violence and Intervention in the Central African Republic* (London, UK: Zed Books, 2016), 188.

⁴⁰ Smith, "CAR's History," 30.

⁴¹ Emizet F Kisangani, "Social Cleavages and Politics of Exclusion: Instability in the Central African Republic," *International Journal on World Peace* (March 2015), 40.

presidential guard with Yakoma soldiers. In a few years, Yakoma, who make up roughly 5 percent of the population, accounted for 70 percent of the army.⁴² He also put family members and coethnics in management positions in many parastatals. As one western diplomat serving in Bangui put it: “He invented ethnicity, if one understand by that the manipulation of tribalism for political ends in a country united by a lingua franca, Sango, and in which the origin of the people had not had any importance for some time.”⁴³ For over a decade, those coethnics of Kolingba reaped the benefits of state resources while the rest of the country was left in the cold.

This favoritism would be the General’s ultimate undoing. As the Cold War came to an end, France revisited its Africa policy and decided to pare down military forces stationed on the continent and move away from dictators. Kolingba announced future multi-party elections on the radio, bluntly stating that he came to decision “because those who pay us asked me to.”⁴⁴ Considering the political significance of ethnicity and the percentage of Central Africans of Yakoma, this was a political death sentence for Kolingba. In 1993, elections carefully organized by France brought Ange-Felix Patassé to power.

Patassé initially took the opposite approach of his predecessor. He came to power thanks to a political alliance between the Gbaya and Sara-Kaba under the banner of his party, Mouvement pour la Liberation du Peuple Centrafricain (MLPC). Both hail from the northwest, a part of the country that had felt marginalized by the French during the colonial era.⁴⁵ Together, the Gbaya and Sara-Kaba make up roughly 45 percent of the population. Not only can the next two largest ethnic groups not muster similar numbers, but their home regions do not border each other.⁴⁶ The “Northern Alliance,” as it was

⁴² International Crisis Group, “Anatomy of a Phantom State,” 8.

⁴³ International Crisis Group, “Anatomy of a Phantom State,” 8.

⁴⁴ International Crisis Group, “Anatomy of a Phantom State,” 8.

⁴⁵ Andreas Mehler, “Rebels and Parties: The Impact of Armed Insurgency on Representation in the Central African Republic,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (2011), 120.

⁴⁶ “The Central African Republic,” *The Central Intelligence Agency*, 06 November, 2017, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ct.html>.

known, was easy to mobilize because of their shared experiences and provided Patassé with the numbers to grab the presidency.

However, within a few years, Patassé increasingly favored his own ethnic group. He shifted the presidential guard, entirely Yakoma at the time, into the regular army and he replaced it with a regional militia made up entirely of Sara-Kaba men, his own ethnic group. The transferred officers viewed the move as a demotion and were further rankled by budgetary cuts to the regular army as French assistance dried up.⁴⁷ This led to a number of mutinies over arrears. One in 1996, drew a response from France after French businesses were attacked. Hundreds of French troops descended on Bangui and dozens of civilians were killed in the crossfire.⁴⁸

In addition to security problems, the regime also had issues on the economic front. Patassé installed family members in key government positions and prioritized his own ethnic group.⁴⁹ Patassé, who preferred attending ceremonies and travelling to governing, followed the hands-off approach of his predecessor. Refusing to control his cabinet, rent-seeking behavior exploded during his tenure.⁵⁰ This was compounded by a drying up of international aid dollars. Not only was France looking to spend less in Africa, but international development organizations were hesitant to invest in the Central African Republic by Patassé's anti-western rhetoric.⁵¹ As violent clashes continued and the economy slide backwards, the only who seemed to prosper were those inner circle of the regime.

Patassé also had a hard time making allies abroad. Because he had assisted Congolese opposition-turned rebel leader Jean-Pierre Bamba to smuggle diamonds via Bangui's airport, the regime in Kinshasa cut off Patassé's regime from oil refined in the western DRC. Libya's Omar Qaddafi stepped into offer not only oil but also military

⁴⁷ Smith, "CAR's History," 31.

⁴⁸ Smith, "CAR's History," 32.

⁴⁹ Smith, "CAR's History," 35.

⁵⁰ Wohlers, "A Central African Elite Perspective," 310.

⁵¹ Wohlers, "A Central African Elite Perspective," 309.

assistance to offset the losses from France's drawback.⁵² Not only was this a shock to Paris, which did not want to see Qaddafi's influence rise in francophone Africa, but it also angered the Central African Republic's northern neighbor, Chad. Idriss Déby had been in power in Chad since 1990, but Chad's rivalry with Libya dates back to the late 1960s. Déby viewed Libyan involvement in the Central African Republic as an attempt to open a second front in their rivalry.⁵³

Despite serious issues home and abroad, Patassé still managed to win reelection in September 1999. His win was made possible by a few factors. The first, his opponents, David Dacko and Andre Kolingba, were not widely popular. Secondly, he directed his campaign at his Sara ethnic group and their Gbaya neighbors, who together made up nearly 45 percent of the population.⁵⁴ And finally, in the years leading up to election, his regime had begun to support a number of regional militias.⁵⁵ This support was particularly important because after years of neglect security services outside of the presidential guard had become incredibly ineffective. To protect from bandits, smugglers, or even armed groups from any of the Central African Republic's neighbors—four of the country's five neighbors experienced internal conflict in the 1990s—Central Africans living outside of Bangui and its suburbs formed regional militias to replace the army and police. Promising butter to some ethnic groups and a supply of guns to others, Patassé managed to eked out a victory in an election that was noted for more than a few irregularities.

Five months after the election, violence rocked the Central African Republic. On May 28, a group of fighters attacked the presidential palace with rocket propelled grenades but was repulsed by the presidential guard after a few hours of fighting. Perhaps thinking the attack had been successful, General Kolingba announced on the radio he was behind the coup.⁵⁶ In response, Patassé took a number of steps against those perceived as

⁵² Smith, "CAR's History," 36.

⁵³ Wohlers, "A Central African Elite Perspective," 310.

⁵⁴ Wohlers, "A Central African Elite Perspective," 314.

⁵⁵ International Crisis Group, "Roots of Violence," 3.

⁵⁶ Smith, "CAR's History," 34.

enemies. Almost immediately, he dispatched troops, including Libyan soldiers and Congolese rebels, to run any Yakoma Central Africans out of Bangui. Nearly 300 were killed and tens of thousands fled.⁵⁷ Patassé then disbanded a number of predominantly Yakoma army units serving outside of Bangui and shrank the size of the presidential guard in favor a Libyan troops on the grounds their loyalty was not in question. Finally, in November, he attempted to arrest his army chief of staff and former compatriot, François Bozizé who was suspected of being involved in the coup.⁵⁸ Bozizé narrowly escaped his arrest and made his to Paris via Chad. It marked an end to the “northern alliance” between the Gbaya and Sara-Kaba.⁵⁹ Identity was an effective tool for elites to grab and maintain power.

3. The Rise of Chadian Influence and the Incidental Muslim Takeover

With Patassé increasingly isolating himself and the economy screeching to a halt because of the violence, his time in power was not for long. Miraculously evading his French police escort, Bozizé flew to Chad in November 2002 and began planning an invasion with Déby. Déby’s interest in the Central African Republic stems from a desire to secure his own position. The product of a rebel group that had ties the Chadian-Central African-Sudanese border area himself, Déby recognized the importance of having leverage in the Central African Republic. He also had to be concerned with the Chadian diaspora living in Bangui which harbored many anti-Déby sentiments.⁶⁰ Without said leverage, the Déby regime exposes itself to potential coups or insurgencies that foment on Chad’s southern border. This vulnerability encouraged Déby to at minimum seek friendly relations with Bangui and have a role in every power transition in the country since he seized the Chadian presidency 1990.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Smith, “CAR’s History,” 35.

⁵⁸ Smith, “CAR’s History,” 36.

⁵⁹ Mehler, “Rebels and Parties,” 121.

⁶⁰ Roland Marchal, “CAR and the Regional (Dis)Order,” in *Making Sense of the Central African Republic*, eds. Tatiana Carayannis and Louisa Lombard (London, UK: Zed Books, 2015), 182.

⁶¹ Marchal, “CAR and the Regional (Dis)Order,” 183

Appealing to Central African Republic's neighbors on Bozizé's behalf, Déby not only arranged their approval but also money, weapons, and fighters.⁶² In March 2003, while Patassé was abroad for an economic summit, Bozizé struck. With a handful of Central African officers and a force comprising mainly of Chadians, Bozizé came down from the northeast of the country and took Bangui without organized resistance from the army, presidential guard, or French forces.⁶³ Everyone decided they had enough of Patassé.

Bozizé's first weeks in power were rocky ones. His "liberators," as they referred to themselves, went on a widespread looting spree. An estimated 600 vehicles were driven to Chad over the course of two weeks.⁶⁴ Even the Central Africans in the group were not of from Bozizé's Gbaya ethnic group, had little loyalty to him and participated in the chaos.⁶⁵ He appealed to Déby, who obliged and sent Chadian regulars to help bring order.⁶⁶ Most liberators fled with their loot back to their homes rather than fight the Chadian soldiers. Though a brief, this period of lawlessness would leave a distaste in many Central Africans for both Chadians and rebel groups from the northeast.

After restoring order in the capital, Bozizé went about forming his government and planning for the future. The initial signs looked good: his interim cabinet was both multi-ethnic and technocratic and he promised elections within two years. There was also a general sense among Central Africans that Bozizé, a lifelong soldier who abstained from alcohol, could be trusted.⁶⁷ However, after winning an election that was deemed free and fair by the United Nations in the spring 2005, Bozizé's vision took a turn. Convinced that the people gave him a blank check, Bozizé began replacing technocrats with his kin and kith.⁶⁸ Much like how Sara-Kaba elites flourished under Patassé and

⁶² Smith, "CAR's History," 36.

⁶³ International Crisis Group, "Anatomy of a Phantom State," 16.

⁶⁴ Smith, "CAR's History," 37.

⁶⁵ Kisangani, "Social Cleavages and Politics of Exclusion," 45.

⁶⁶ International Crisis Group, "Anatomy of a Phantom State," 17.

⁶⁷ Wohlers, "A Central African Elite Perspective," 315.

⁶⁸ Smith, "CAR's History," 37.

Yakoma elites under Kolingba, the Gbaya began to benefit from a coethnic running the state.

Not even a month after the election, the Army for the Restoration of the Republic and Democracy (APRD) began conducting raids on army positions. Ange-Felix Patassé controlled the APRD from his exile in Togo and the group was comprised of officers from Patassé's presidential guard and local militias and bandits that operate in the northwestern Central African Republic where Patassé is from.⁶⁹ Bozizé sent his forces, including some Chadian soldiers who were more or less permanently stationed in Bangui, to put down the rebels. They did so quite brutally. Indiscriminate killings and rape became common occurrences. An estimated 100,000 people fled their homes. As one Catholic priest put it "[the government forces] have no respect for life. As far as they are concerned, the lives of people who do not belong to their ethnic group are worth nothing."⁷⁰ Fighting lasted until 2007 and the signing of the Sirte Accords with Qaddafi acting as the guarantor of the agreement. Many of the APRD's top leaders—notably except Patassé—received government positions. The accord also stipulated that the army would secure the regions from bandits (the irony of this considering the APRD's composition must have been ignored).⁷¹

In the spring of 2006, a year after the APRD took up arms, the Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (UFDR in its French acronym) launched its own insurrection in the northeastern province, Vakaga. The UFDR was comprised mainly of militiamen from the local Gula and Runga ethnic groups and formed in response to tensions and violence with nomadic herdsman from neighboring Chad and Sudan.⁷² The group's leaders were: Captain Akabar Sabone, a dismissed and disgruntled liberator, Major Hassan Justin, a former officer in Patasse's presidential guard, and Michel

⁶⁹ Smith, "CAR's History," 38.

⁷⁰ International Crisis Group, "Anatomy of a Phantom State," 23.

⁷¹ International Crisis Group, "Anatomy of a Phantom State," 23.

⁷² Nathalia Dukhan, et al., "State Fragility in the Central African Republic: What Prompted the 2013 Coup?" *GSDRC Applied Knowledge Services* (March 2013), 7.

Djotodia, a Soviet-educated former civil servant.⁷³ UFDR's official grievances include the underdeveloped nature of Vakaga (even for Central African standards), insecurity caused by Chadian and Sudanese armed groups, and the political marginalization of the region—though at least two of three leaders had other reasons to rebel against Bozizé.⁷⁴

Sabone and Djotodia were arrested while in Benin at Bozizé's behest but the rebellion persisted. In October 2006 the UFDR took the largest town in the province, Biaro. The town was retaken by the army with the help of 18 French military advisers. In the end, a counterattack by the UFDR hastened their own defeat. French President Jacques Chirac could not risk French soldiers being killed or taken hostage as he was in the middle of a reelection campaign. He ordered a paratrooper regiment to airdrop into Biaro and defend it against UFDR attack.⁷⁵ With two leaders in prison and the unexpected arrival of the French military, the UFDR signed a peace agreement with the regime in Libreville, Gabon. The agreement called for the UFDR's envelopment into the regime and a payment of 50,000 Central African Francs.⁷⁶ Thus, Bozizé's position was bolster again by an election, this time in France.

These rebellions would have drastic effects on the Bozizé regime. In the aftermath, Bozizé felt increasingly dependent on France and Chad. He had relied on soldiers from both countries to bring about peace. In an effort to counterbalance this dependence Bozizé signed a bilateral defense agreement with South Africa. South African troops deployed to the Central African Republic ostensibly to train the Central African Army but also to protect mines that coincidentally had been taken over by South African firms.⁷⁷ This move chilled relations with Central African Republic's neighbors, especially Chad, as well as France. Déby viewed Bozizé as his liege-man in Bangui and felt betrayed by the move.

⁷³ Smith, "CAR's History," 39.

⁷⁴ Dukhan, Nathalia, et al., "State Fragility" 5.

⁷⁵ International Crisis Group, "Anatomy of a Phantom State," 27.

⁷⁶ International Crisis Group, "Anatomy of a Phantom State," 28.

⁷⁷ Dukahn, et al., "State Fragility," 6.

Domestically, the rebellions had two political effects. First, they further entrenched a longstanding dynamic in the Central African Republic: the most effective way to achieve anything is to get it with a Kalashnikov. In fact, victory was no longer necessary. Both losers received payments for peace. A number of groups popped up, some actually attacking villages, some merely threatened to, all hoped to receive disarmament funds. This led to a mostly French EU Force deployed to the country to keep order.⁷⁸ Secondly, Bozizé relied on his Gbaya ethnic group even more than before. Anyone of suspected loyalty was replaced with either a direct family member or a Gbaya person. His son became the Minister of Defense, a nephew the Minister of Mines, the Minister of Energy, and the Treasurer, another cousin the Minister of Tourism, and yet another the party whip in Parliament.⁷⁹

The Central African Republic trudged through another five years of sporadic “rebellions,” payoffs, and nepotism. Foreign soldiers (a combination of both French soldiers, other from neighboring states, and South Africans) kept the situation from spiraling out of control. Things came to a head in January and March 2011 when Bozizé’s party, Na Kwa Na,—Sango for “work, nothing but work”—claimed huge victories in both the legislative and presidential elections. Opposition figures, who had all laid down their arms in the months leading up to the elections, characterized both as fraudulent.⁸⁰ With no apparent way to oust the increasingly isolated regime through legal processes, the potential for armed conflict returned.

Initially it seemed like the isolated and divided rebel groups might not change the status quo as they could easily be dealt with individually bought off or eliminated. That changed in August 2012 when a number of groups operating in and around Vakaga province formed the Séléka (meaning “coalition” or “alliance” in Sango). The UFDR, with its leadership released from prison after the Libreville agreement was signed, joined

⁷⁸ Smith, “CAR’s History,” 41.

⁷⁹ Smith, “CAR’s History,” 48.

⁸⁰ Smith, “CAR’s History,” 43.

four other groups that operated in the area.⁸¹ Many of the men were former liberators released by Bozizé and, given the dynamics of the northeast, Muslim. The Séléka's demands centered around the government's lack of inclusivity and failure to provide financial support to former rebels as required by the various peace agreements negotiated during Bozizé's tenure.⁸² In December 2012, they proved their seriousness by launching an offensive that came within 110 miles of Bangui, routing both the army and international forces in their way.⁸³

At this point, Bozizé implemented his tried and true strategy: pay off the opposition. The two sides again met in Libreville and signed a peace deal on 11 January 2013. The Séléka agreed to withdraw to Vagaka and to allow Bozize to remain in power. In exchange, the regime gave a number of Séléka leaders positions in the transitional government and agreed to expel any foreign troops not under the United Nations.⁸⁴ A tense peace swept the country.

After a few weeks it became obvious neither side planned to uphold the agreement long-term. While Bozizé distributed arms among the population of Bangui in the name of "popular defense," the Séléka's ranks swelled with inclusion of bandits, poachers, and more fighters from Chad (the latter with Déby's alleged encouragement).⁸⁵ The final confrontation happened on 22 March 2013 when the Séléka came thundering down from the northeast, their ranks swelling with even more bandits, poachers, and militiamen as they went. Within 48 hours, Bozize had fled across the Ubangi to Congo and Bangui was in control of the Séléka. Michel Djotodia was installed as the transitional president.⁸⁶

⁸¹ "Central African Republic: A Country in the Hands of Seleka War Criminals," *International Federation for Human Rights* (2013), Accessed 15 June 2017 <https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/rca616a2013basdef.pdf>, 9

⁸² Kisangani, "Social Cleavages and Politics of Exclusion," 46.

⁸³ "Central African Republic," *International Federation for Human Rights*, 9.

⁸⁴ Kisangani, "Social Cleavages and Politics of Exclusion," 46.

⁸⁵ Smith, "CAR's History," 43.

⁸⁶ Smith, "CAR's History," 43.

Unlike the aftermath following Bozizé's coup, these rebel forces went far beyond looting Bangui. Indiscriminate killings and rape were common occurrences. Séléka forces razed villages to the ground. As it became apparent Djotodia could not or would not control the Séléka even more groups took up the Séléka banner to justify their activity. Everyone from bandits, to foreigners crossing the border for loot, to legitimate self-defense militias referred to themselves as Séléka fighters. Between March 2013 when Bangui was taken and May 2013 it is estimated that the Séléka grew four times in numbers.⁸⁷ This meant that the violence was not contained to Bangui and its immediate capital but spread in most areas of the country.⁸⁸ Thousands were killed and tens of thousands fled their homes.

4. Southern Response to the Séléka Takeover

The uniqueness of the Séléka's seizure of power should not be overlooked as it forced southern elites to reinvent themselves yet again. Never before had a true Muslim been in power and never somebody from the northeast. It broke the unending cycle of violence between southern elites. To harken back to the literature review, one of Brass' situations of elite conflict that encourage identity formation is a local aristocracy maintaining privilege against a foreign invader. The isolation of the northeast from the rest of the CAR meant that they had no allies among those groups who were familiar with the CAR's political struggles and were largely seen by southerners as foreign invaders. For southern elites, Christianity represented an identity that could cross ethnic lines and still isolate the Séléka's leadership from finding broad support in the south.

In response to the lawlessness throughout the country regional militia networks mobilized to fight the Séléka threat. These groups began collectively referring to

⁸⁷ Amnesty International, "Central African Republic: Human Rights Spiraling Out of Control," (2013), Accessed 15 June 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/AFR19/003/2013/en/>, 11.

⁸⁸ The only part of the Central African Republic that has seen stability since 2012 is the southeast. This is in part due to quick thinking by many local leaders who burned bridges and secured ferries along the Ubangi River and its tributaries, preventing the Séléka from crossing but also because of the presence of American and Ugandan Special Forces who operate in the area hunting for Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army. For more on this see: Ledio Cakaj, "In Unclaimed Land: The Lord's Resistance Army in CAR," in *Making Sense of the Central African Republic*, eds. Tatiana Carayannis and Louisa Lombard (London, UK: Zed Books, 2015), 267–295.

themselves as anti-Balaka. Christians dominated their ranks as these groups drew on locals for their fighters. The anti-Balaka treated civilian with equal respect as the Séléka, they executed prisoners and suspected Séléka sympathizers regularly. Busses would frequently be stopped and riders executed on the side of the road based on their religious affiliation.⁸⁹ Killings and reprisals by each side only served to harden the resolve of the other and encouraged most following the crisis to describe it with an ancient hatreds lens.

In an effort to stop the violence, Djotodia announced he was disbanding the Séléka and ordered them to return home in September 2013. However, in reality, he had little control over the fighters (especially the newcomers) and few obeyed his orders.⁹⁰ By this time nearly 1.5 million Central Africans—a third of the population— had fled their homes and the United Nations issued warnings about a potential genocide.⁹¹ By December, France, with the blessing of the U.N., launched Operation Sanagaris to restore public order and protect civilians. After a few weeks, thousands of additional U.N. peacekeeping troops, mostly from a number of African countries, India and Pakistan followed. The next month, a summit of African leaders in Chad pressured Djotodia and his government to resign and installed a transitional government (Transitional National Council, TNC) headed by a former mayor of Bangui, Catherine Samba-Panza.⁹² Even with Djotodia ousted and an influx of peacekeepers the troubles afflicting the Central African Republic were far from over.

Despite the efforts of the international peacekeepers the situation continued to smolder. Both the Séléka and the anti-Balaka splintered, though groups continue to fight under those banners.⁹³ According to Human Rights Watch, over 250 civilians were killed through the first ten months of 2017, countless more have been maimed or are the victims

⁸⁹ International Crisis Group, “The Roots of Violence,” 16.

⁹⁰ Smith, “CAR’s History,” 43.

⁹¹ Michelle Nichols, “U.N. Officials See Risk of Genocide in Central African Republic,” Reuters, 1 November, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-centralafrica-un-idUSBRE9A00Y120131101>.

⁹² Smith, “CAR’s History,” 43.

⁹³ Lombard, *State of Rebellion*, 22.

of sexual violence.⁹⁴ Although Christian Central Africans were certainly among the victims, Muslims, perhaps because of their relative few numbers, have been particularly vulnerable in the years following the Séléka's takeover and subsequent ouster. Their minority status in the south makes mobilizing an adequate defense from Christian militias difficult. Eighty percent of the Central African Republic's Muslim community has fled the country and 417 of the country's 435 mosques have been destroyed.⁹⁵ Unlike other periods of the country's history, the fallout of Séléka crisis does not appear to have an end in sight.

B. RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

This section will outline the religious demographics of the Central African Republic. These demographics show the minority position Muslim Central Africans are in and explain why, for many years, elites did not view religion as a suitable identity to mobilize in an effort to take power.

Roughly half of the country's 5.2 million people are Christian, split evenly between Catholics and Protestants (Pentecostalism is the fastest growing protestant sect). Muslims make up another 15 percent of the population, with the overwhelming majority belonging to Sunni Sufi sects. The final third of Central Africans practice indigenous forms of animism.⁹⁶ These demographic numbers mean that in a religious conflict (violent or political), the Muslim community is at an extreme disadvantage.

Though they live in nearly every region of the Central African Republic, Muslims are the majority in only a few places in the country. The most prominent area is the northeast region of the country, in all of Vakaga province and parts of the Bamingui-Bangoran and Haute-Kotto provinces. They are members of the Gula and Runga ethnic groups and have lived in what is now the Central African Republic since before the

⁹⁴ Human Rights Watch, "Central African Republic: Civilians Targeted as Violence Surges" 27 (Washington, DC: HRW Publishing, October 2017), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/10/27/central-african-republic-civilians-targeted-violence-surges>.

⁹⁵ "Central African Republic – Factsheet" United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2017, <http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Policy%20Update-CAR%20Factsheet%20October%202017.pdf>. 4.

⁹⁶ Arieff, *Crisis in the Central African Republic*, 2.

arrival of the French.⁹⁷ Outside of this region, the only area where Muslims live in significant numbers are certain neighborhoods and suburbs in and around Bangui. These Muslims tend to be immigrants—or their descendants—from Chad, Sudan, West Africa, and the Middle East.⁹⁸ The lack of a concentrated Muslim population in the south meant that in there was little incentive by southern politicians to mobilize Islamic identity as they would be dominated by their Christian neighbors.

Conversely, Christianity is an effective tool for elites to mobilize if a Muslim group were to take power in the Central African Republic. Outside of the capital city Bangui, the nearest area of country with a majority Muslim population is hundreds of miles away. It would be difficult for a Muslim group to find widespread support outside of Bangui if religion were mobilized.

C. CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown that for the majority of the last four decades, Central African elites chose to mobilize ethnic or regional identities over religious ones. This is because the demographics of the Central African Republic suggest that religion would not be politically mobilized. A mobilization of Christianity would not differentiate southern ethnic groups enough. While a mobilization of Islamic identity would result in domination by Christians. The only scenario where it would be logical to mobilize religion over ethnicity is if a incidentally Muslim group took power. This did not happen until Chadian President Déby rid himself of Bozizé and threw Chadian support behind the Séléka. Only then did the conditions permit the mobilization of religious identity.

⁹⁷ Louisa Lombard, “The Autonomous Zone Conundrum: Armed Conservation and Rebellion in North-Eastern CAR,” in *Making Sense of the Central African Republic*, eds. Tatiana Carayannis and Louisa Lombard (London, UK: Zed Books, 2015), 144.

⁹⁸ Fazui Kilembe, “Local Dynamics in the Pk5 District of Bangui,” in *Making Sense of the Central African Republic*, ed. Tatiana Carayannis and Louisa Lombard (London, UK: Zed Books, 2015), 97

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III. ENABLING THE ELITES: MASS-LEVEL DYNAMICS

When the Séléka took power in March 2013, southern political elites of every ethnic group found themselves removed from power. They then mobilized behind religion as it was the one identity that cut across ethnic cleavages. The shift did not take long to reach the mass level. Within weeks of the Séléka takeover Christian militias began indiscriminately attacking Muslim neighborhoods and hamlets. The speed at which average Central Africans responded to elite overtures is a result of mass-level differences and tensions between Christian and Muslims that existed in country before the Séléka crisis.

This chapter studies the differences that created these tensions. There are three categories of factors that created these differences. The first category is largely the result of the geography of the northeast region of the country. Rough terrain largely isolated the region from the remainder of the country and led it to develop different social and economic norms. The second category is socio-economic differences between Christians and Muslims that developed in the southern Central African Republic. The former allowed Christian elites the Séléka to be framed as a foreign force. While the latter allowed Muslims living in all parts of the Central African Republic to be lumped in with the Séléka as foreigners or sympathizers. Third category is more modern. It is the increased use of telecommunications by average Central Africans. This allowed atrocities committed by both sides to be widely known. This helped compound communal fears and harden sectarian identities.

A. REMOTENESS OF THE NORTHEAST AND CENTRAL AFRICAN IDENTITY

Former Central African prime minister Jean-Paul Ngoupandé once referred to the northeast portion of the country, the birthplace of the Séléka, as “another world.”⁹⁹ The region developed somewhat independently of the rest of the country because of a number of cultural, political, and geographical reasons. This led to a feeling of isolation on the

⁹⁹ International Crisis Group, “Anatomy of a Phantom State,” 25.

part of those from the region and in some ways created an identity that is different from what typically found in the south. These differences allowed southerners to doubt the Séléka's Central Africanness despite attempts by the Séléka to signal to the contrary.

Geography and climate partly explain the northeast region of the Central African Republic developed independently from the rest of the country. There are roughly 500 airliner miles between Bangui and the Vakaga province's capital city, Biaro. However, during the rainy season, the distance might as well be 500 million miles. The rains turn the area in between into impassable marshlands. Since there are few all-weather roads in the country, the northeast is largely unreachable from the south with ground transportation.¹⁰⁰ Air transit into the area is also difficult as there are only a few dirt airstrips in the region. Chad and the Sudans have the same arid savanna climate as the northeast region of the Central African Republic, meaning it is easier to conduct international trade than domestic trade for Central Africans living in the northeast.

These conditions have ensured the people who live in northeastern Central African Republic have deeper ties to those living in modern day Chad and Sudan than they do to their southern Central African compatriots. For example, although Sango, the national language of the Central African Republic, is spoken in the northeast, most Central Africans in the area grow up speaking Arabic. Also, the Sufi brotherhoods that dominate the regions owe allegiance to orders located in Chad or the Sudans.¹⁰¹ On top of the previously-mentioned economic differences, there are real cultural differences between the northeast region and the rest of the Central African Republic.

These differences contributed to the Central African Republic lacking what Pierre Englebert would call horizontal legitimacy—that is a lack of an agreement who qualifies as “Central African.”¹⁰² Though Central Africans living in the northeast consider themselves Central Africans, this view is not shared by their compatriots to the south for a number of the reasons. First, similar to some in the United States who argue that

¹⁰⁰ Kisangani, “Social Cleavages and Politics of Exclusion,” 48.

¹⁰¹ International Crisis Group, “Anatomy of a Phantom State,” 25.

¹⁰² Pierre Englebert, “Pre-colonial institutions, post-colonial states, and economic development in tropical Africa,” *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 53. No. 1 (January 2000), 7.

Christianity is intrinsically part of American identity, many Central Africans argue that to be truly Central African one must be Christian.¹⁰³ This was likely influenced by favoritism by both colonial and contemporary governments on predominantly Christian ethnic groups. Secondly, the pride many Central Africans have in Sango, being the only African country with a wholly African national language, makes speaking Sango a requirement for “Central Africaness,” a requirement many northeasterners do not meet.¹⁰⁴ Finally, many southerners point to the economic and cultural links to other countries that many in the region maintain as a disqualifying factor.¹⁰⁵ These differing views on who is a valid Central African meant that during the Séléka crisis, many on the Anti-Balaka side saw any Muslim as sympathizing with foreign invaders. Although it does not excuse the abuses, it does contextualize them.

Many actions by the government leading up to the Séléka crisis suggest the government shared this opinion. Even though the people of the northeast region have familial and cultural connections that cross international borders, these connections are not always harmonious. For decades, Runga and Gula herdsmen clashed with herdsmen from Sudan over grazing grounds.¹⁰⁶ The government did little to protect its citizens. The army never deployed to the area in large numbers and, to this day, there are only two border control points along the 750 miles of border in the region.¹⁰⁷ Though at one point, the Bozize regime negotiated reparations from Sudan after a particularly violent episode, the regime also promptly embezzled the payments and the money never made it to the affected communities.¹⁰⁸

Despite being kept at arms-length by the state, northeasterners often display loyalty to the Central African Republic. In April 2006, a group of Chadian rebels set up camp in the Vakaga province with the intention of using it as a staging ground to launch

¹⁰³ Lombard, “Autonomous Zone Conundrum,” 47.

¹⁰⁴ Marchal, “Being Rich, Being Poor,” 66.

¹⁰⁵ Marchal, “Being Rich, Being Poor,” 66.

¹⁰⁶ International Crisis Group, “Anatomy of a Phantom State,” 25.

¹⁰⁷ International Crisis Group, “Anatomy of a Phantom State,” 25.

¹⁰⁸ International Crisis Group, “Anatomy of a Phantom State,” 25.

attacks into Chad. A local sheikh took it upon himself to tip off Central African authorities of the rebels' arrival. However, when the Central African army arrived, they attacked the local Gula population, killing civilians and burning homes for supposedly abetting the rebels.¹⁰⁹ Decades of neglect and similar abuses led to the ethnic groups of the northeast uniting under the Séléka banner. Their diversity meant they had to use their least common denominator: Islam.

The isolation of the northeast portion of the country led to vast cultural differences in the region compared to the rest of the Central African Republic. In the northeast, an Arabic-speaking, Sunni Arab society developed. While in the south, a Sango-speaking Christian and Animist society sprang up. These differences enabled southern elites to paint the Séléka to as foreign invaders. However, long before the elites started to push this narrative, southern Central Africans long considered Christianity and Sango as a key feature of "Central Africanness." To harken back to the literature review, the Séléka crisis could be seen in Fearon and Laitin's assertion that marginalized members of society will contest common assumptions about identities. The contest over who counts as Central African, and thus has access to state resources and protection, became violent but its roots are in a philosophical debate surrounding what it means to be Central African.

B. OCCUPATIONAL DIFFERENCES ENCOURAGE SECTARIAN DISTRUST

The differences between Muslim and Christian Central Africans is not merely a product of geography. In the south, differences in occupation, compounded by religious divides, led to a society riddled with distrust. Though the difference in profession may seem a minor point in the grand scheme of things, it can determine the way people view a variety of issues and values. Farmers may be incentivized to have large families to help work the land and may not be able to send their children to school. An urban shopkeeper may have an incentive for a smaller family—as the shop is only so big—and might be able to afford to send the few she has to school.

¹⁰⁹ International Crisis Group, "Anatomy of a Phantom State," 26.

In the Central African Republic, professional differences are compounded by religious differences that create animosity between the two groups. Christians typically work for the government or farm the land. Conversely, Muslims dominate the private sector, which includes everything from small grocery stores in Bangui to management positions in timber firms, or raising cattle. Both the Arab and European slave trades contributed to this division in two ways. First, southern ethnic groups, who now tend to be Christian, were devastated by slave raiding. Low population density from the slave trade continues to impede modern economic growth, because when the slave raiding days ended, southern ethnic groups found themselves in a weak position to develop.¹¹⁰ Secondly, the northern ethnic groups tend to be Muslim and thus were either a part of slave raiding or were better able to defend themselves from raiders. These trading networks did not end with slavery and do not stop at international borders. To this day, many Muslim groups draw cultural, religious, and economic support from groups in Chad and both Sudans.¹¹¹ During colonialism, France did not encourage indigenous industry or develop the country, which made these Muslim Central Africans economic networks vital to prosperity. This uneven footing more easily allowed Muslim Central Africans to become entrepreneurs, compared to Christians.

Despite a history of intermarriage and cooperative relationships, the Muslim domination of business led to some tensions and jealousies between the two groups.¹¹² These tensions stem from a regional belief common among both Christians and Animists regarding private property and the accumulation of person wealth. Rooted in an egalitarian outlook on both land and personal property, e.g., the idea that improving the situation of the community is more important than improving the situation of the individual, thus they consider the accumulation of personal wealth (such as running a business) selfish and even a sign of sorcery.¹¹³ Islam, on the other hand, encourages accumulating individual wealth as long as one tithes appropriately. An individual who

¹¹⁰ Nathan Nunn, "The Long-Term Effects of Africa's Slave Trades," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 123.1 (2008), 166.

¹¹¹ Lombard, "The Autonomous Zone Conundrum," 145.

¹¹² Arieff, *Crisis in the Central African Republic*, 9.

¹¹³ Marchal, "Being Rich, Being Poor," 62.

accumulated more wealth is required by the Islamic tenant of *Zakat* to give more to the mosque or other Islamic organization, while these organizations in turn better society.¹¹⁴ These diametrically opposed views on wealth created tension between the two groups, especially in urban areas, where many Muslim migrants live and intermingling with other religious groups is common.

Due to the chaos and violence endemic to the Central African Republic, society largely carries out its own justice. Those suspected of sorcery are usually condemned to death by communal beating.¹¹⁵ This mob violence takes place in both rural and urban environments. -level government officials including police and military officers have been known to take part in these acts.¹¹⁶ The participation of low and mid-tier state officials suggest that elites could not control this behavior even if they wanted to and that the masses drive the actions of elites.

In the last decade, the increase of Pentecostal churches throughout the country has brought many of these tensions to the forefront. These awakening churches, as they are known, place a strong importance on combating sorcery, even advocating for individual parish members to inflict violence on suspected sorcerers. Pentecostal churches in Bangui regularly pass out literature and give literal soapbox speeches warning passersby of Christians being coerced to convert to Islam and publicizing ISIS's latest terror attack in Europe.¹¹⁷ These actions primed many of the Christian inhabitants of Bangui and its suburbs to the intercommunal distrust and animosity that came with the Séléka crisis.

Relatedly, this division encourages Muslims and Christians to hold starkly different outlooks regarding both the economic goals of the state and government corruption. Since Muslims dominate commercial enterprises, Christians largely farm or work in the civil service (Muslims generally have a hard time finding employment in the civil service). Christians in the Central African Republic do not take issue with

¹¹⁴ Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam*, 163.

¹¹⁵ Marchal, "Being Rich, Being Poor," 56.

¹¹⁶ Louisa Lombard and Sylvain Btaïanga-Kinzi, "Violence, Popular Punishment, and War in the Central African Republic," *African Affairs*, 114, no. 454 (2014), doi: 10.1093/afraf/ doi: 10.1093/afraf/ adu079adu079, 65.

¹¹⁷ Kilembe, "Local Dynamics in the Pk5 District of Bangui," 86.

government officials using their office to profit as long as they enrich their community (i.e., ethnic group) at the same time.¹¹⁸ This particularly infuriates Muslims, as they are typically the ones who must pay bribes or permit fees to run their businesses. Even when Christians acknowledge that rent-seeking is not an ideal practice, often they shrug off the bribes or shakedowns off, since Muslims are believed to be wealthy and thus can afford to pay.¹¹⁹ One feature of the Séléka crisis is that when the group took the capital city, and in the days immediately following, thousands joined their ranks to get their share of the loot. One reason frequently cited by these late-comers when explaining their reasons for joining the Séléka were these abuses targeted at the Muslim community by Christian government officials.¹²⁰

In areas outside of Bangui or large villages, another Christian-Muslim professional divide is important. This divide is between agriculturalist and pastoralists. Ethnic groups in the Central African Republic that predominantly raise cattle are also predominantly Muslim, whereas the predominantly Christian groups raise crops. These tensions are particularly prominent in the northwestern part of the country, where the semi-nomadic Fulani people drive their herds. The Gbaya, overwhelmingly Christian, dominate the region and live sedentary lifestyles. Tensions over land use dates back decades, and unlike their counterparts in the city, minor gun-battles periodically erupt between Christian farmers and Muslims herdsman.¹²¹

Though far from the birthplace of the Séléka, the Vakaga province on the opposite side of the country, these pastoralist-agriculturalist tensions were still powerful in the time before and after the Séléka crisis. After the Séléka took power in March 2013, thousands of volunteers took up the Séléka mantle. These volunteers were a motley crew. Some were from local self-defense militias, others bandits and highwaymen, but a

¹¹⁸ Marchal, "Being Rich, Being Poor," 64.

¹¹⁹ Louisa Lombard, *State of Rebellion*, 93.

¹²⁰ Lombard, *State of Rebellion*, 92.

¹²¹ International Crisis Group, "The Roots of Violence," 41.

number were the sons of Fulani pastoralists.¹²² Attempting to increase the legitimacy of their cause by associating themselves with the new regime in Bangui, many Fulani in the northwestern corner of the Central African Republic referred to themselves as Séléka fighters after Bangui fell to the Séléka in March 2013. The Gbaya and other locals, predominantly Christian, in turn began referring to their groups as anti-Balaka.¹²³ Though the rivalry over resources predated any contemporary events, the people fighting in it never specifically couched their argument in religious terms until after the Séléka crisis.

C. INCREASED USE OF TELECOMMUNICATIONS INCREASED FEARS

Social media and cellphones also played a significant role in shifting and hardening identities in the Central African Republic. The Séléka committed a number of atrocities on their march towards Bangui. Unfortunately for Central Africans, this was not out of the ordinary for Central African coups. The rebel groups that supported both Patassé and Bozizé during their rises to power both committed countless crimes against the general public.¹²⁴ A key factor between those instances of conflict and the Séléka crisis was a significant increase in telecommunication networks. From the turn of the century to the beginning of the Séléka crisis, there was an increase in home Internet use nearly 60-fold. This change is on top of a similar increase in cell phone usage.¹²⁵ This increase in telecommunications usage allowed atrocities to be widely shared, stoking fears and hardening identities.

Before the Séléka reached Bangui, the city was already on edge. In part, this was because Central Africans in Séléka-controlled territory posted videos and images of atrocities committed against them on Facebook and sent warnings to their family and

¹²² “Central African Republic: Human Rights Spiraling Out of Control,” Amnesty International (2013), Accessed 15 June 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/AFR19/003/2013/en/>, 11.

¹²³ International Crisis Group, “Roots of Violence,” 42.

¹²⁴ Patrick Berg, “A Crisis-Complex, Not Complex Crises: Conflict Dynamics in the Sudan, Chad and Central African Republic Tri-Border Area,” *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft* 4, (March 2008): 72–86, http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/ipg/ipg-2008-4/08_a_berg_gb.pdf.

¹²⁵ International Telecommunications Union, “Percentage of Individuals using the Internet 2000–2012,” (Geneva, 2013), https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/.../2013/Individuals_Internet_2000-2012.xls.

friends on WhatsApp.¹²⁶ This set the Christian community on edge, played into preexisting tensions, and made them vulnerable to further manipulation by elites.

It was not just Christian Central Africans who reported the violence on their social media pages. When reprisals against Muslim civilians began following the Séléka's capture of Bangui, the Muslim community began a similar trend. In a particularly gruesome video posted to Facebook, a group of Christians pulled a man suspected Séléka sympathizer off a bus and beat him to death. One member of the mob then proceeded to eat the suspected sympathizer's flesh.¹²⁷ Social media and cellphones amplified the fears of the Muslims Central African community as it did their Christian neighbors.

Central Africans were able to telegraph warning in ways that were not previous available in past coups and instances of violence. This primed Central African for intercommunal violence in a new way. This instilled fear into each community. In turn it made them turn to elites who promised to protect them from the violence being inflicted upon them.

D. CONCLUSION

Factors such as geography, migration trends, colonial legacies and government policies throughout the Central African Republic's history encouraged contemporary interreligious tensions. However, what caused them to change from what was, at worst, benign unpleasantness to violence was fear and uncertainty. As the Séléka march toward Bangui, the Christian community became increasingly concerned about potential reprisals committed against them by the Séléka for decades of inequality since independence. This was justified by the reports of atrocities already being committed by the Séléka spreading on social media. These fears caused the Christian community to preemptively lash out against the Muslim community. Together, these factors made Central African society ripe for elite manipulation. The methods elites used to manipulate society is the topic of the next chapter.

¹²⁶ Lombard, *State of Terror*, 205.

¹²⁷ Lombard, *State of Rebellion*, 202.

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IV. DOMESTIC ELITE CAPITALIZATION AND CAUSES OF IDENTITY SHIFT

Now that the contextual foundation has been laid and the enabling factors discussed, this thesis will now explain elite-mobilization strategies. This chapter begins by discussing the characteristics of the southern political elites. These characteristics affect the mobilizations strategies available to elites in similar ways to population demographics. Next, it analyzes the structures and incentives placed on elites to better explain why they mobilize along identity and not ideational lines. It then turns to how the elites mobilized religion during the Séléka crisis and the advantages that accompanied that mobilization. Finally, this chapter discusses mobilization strategies attempted by elites since the Séléka was forced from power.

A. SOUTHERN ELITE CHARACTERISTICS

First, it is important to discuss who exactly the elites are in the Central African Republic. To harken back to the literature review, Jennifer Todd noted power relations as one of the three factors to analyze when studying identity shifts. This section will help provide a better foundation for understanding power relations in the Central African Republic. Many of the characteristics of a member of the elite in Central African Republic encourage that person to seek advantage through extrajudicial means. To do this requires embedding oneself in a patronage network (or creating one), which are typically organized along ethnic and familial lines.

The colonial era determined many of the characteristics of the typical Central African elite. The first characteristic is that until recently few elites had college degrees.¹²⁸ This is because the French ceded most power to the private sector and made very little efforts to invest in the educational system. For example, it was only in 1956 that the first class of Central Africans graduated secondary school, and that class was just 1956, the first *lycee* in the Central African Republic graduated its first class of a few dozen students, the pool of Central Africans even qualified to pursue secondary degrees

¹²⁸ Wohlers, "A Central African Elite Perspective," 297.

at independence was paltry.¹²⁹ This meant at independence there were few indigenous qualified technocrats. While there was a major push under the Bokassa regime to expand educational opportunities to Central Africans, decades of episodic violence and arrears led to a crumbling education system. Those elites that do have advanced educations typically received their training overseas, usually in France. This left the country with few competent technocrats to efficiently run state bureaucracies, even those with earnest intentions had few qualifications.

A second characteristic of the Central African elites is that they rarely have backgrounds or experience in the private sector.¹³⁰ Foreign firms dominated the private sector and hired few Central Africans except for manual laborers—rarely managers. Thus, the civil service or the army represented the best place for stable, well-paying jobs. Government positions became highly valuable. However, as the civil service began to deteriorate under the Kolingba regime and government budgets began to dry up, the best civil servants, usually those educated overseas, left the country and rent-seeking behavior became rampant.¹³¹ The latter depressed the economy and further encouraged potential elites to avoid the private sector and seek government positions.

A third characteristic is that Central African elites tend to know one another and stems from the previous two. Since there are few schools in the country and the state does not have much presence outside the capital, elites intimately know their rivals.¹³² This may explain why, despite the episodic coups that ravaged the Central African Republic, few elites have been killed by their rivals. Elites fall in and out of power, spend time in prison or go into exile abroad, but rarely does the security service assassinate a given president's rivals.¹³³ Forging a temporary alliance across competing ethnic and regional cleavages is a difficult task to accomplish. However, the political elites knowing each other from school and their days in the civil service would make it easier. This chapter

¹²⁹ Wohlers, "A Central African Elite Perspective," 297.

¹³⁰ Wohlers, "A Central African Elite Perspective," 298.

¹³¹ Wohlers, "A Central African Elite Perspective," 298.

¹³² Wohlers, "A Central African Elite Perspective," 299.

¹³³ Wohlers, "A Central African Elite Perspective," 299.

will show later how elites made these temporary alliances at all stages of the Séléka crisis.

These characteristics have a large impact on power relations in the Central African Republic. First, a lack of education among bureaucrats meant that hiring actions or promotion based on merits was largely impossible, encouraging corruption and nepotism. Second, with little private sector experience or opportunities government positions are seen as a path to personal stability, vastly increasing the value of these jobs. And finally, the relatively small and interconnected circle of elites allowed them to reinvent themselves when necessary. This is key to shift from one identity to another when mobilizing in different eras.

B. STRUCTURES AND INCENTIVES

Before exploring how elites used religious identity to gain political power, it is important to discuss what incentives influenced their decision making. Central African political institutions are incredibly weak and checks on the executive branch are nearly nonexistent. Since independence, the importance of other branches of the federal government and provincial governments severely shrunk. This encourages three important dynamics. First, it encourages the use of patronage networks by the President to maintain power. These networks usually begin with multi-ethnic relationships to aid in the gaining of power, but are slowly paired down to increase efficiency. Second, institutional weakness removes avenues for political contestation and advancement and encourages conflict to escalate to beyond local and regional levels straight to the national level. Third, weak institutions encourage the contestation to be violent in nature and take place outside of them. Together, these factors incentivize elites to mobilize social identities rather than to contest for power based on political ideologies.

Of the many things the Central African Republic inherited from France, perhaps politically the most important was the system of government. In the years leading up to the Central African Republic's independence, French Prime Minister—and soon to be president—Charles De Gaulle ushered in the Fifth Republic. This new Republic centralized the government and increased the power of the new office of the president

vis-à-vis the office of the prime minister.¹³⁴ Central African politicians designed a government that emulated the Fifth Republic during the decolonization process. This put immense power in the hands of the President and, without institutions that could check the executive, ensured that the only real offices worth holding in the Central African Republic are the presidency or cabinet ministries, making political power zero-sum.¹³⁵

What little checks on presidential power existed began to melt away quickly. The first action taken by David Dacko, the Central African Republic's first President, put opposition leaders in prison and banned their parties, making the country a one-party state.¹³⁶ This action was not challenged by the courts (whose judges were appointed by Dacko). Even when the Central African Republic returned to a multi-party system, the opposition did not check the president's power. If anything, corruption and nepotism increased under Patassé and Bozizé. The fact that political parties played little, if any, role in the peace processes from the late 1990s to the present suggests that Central African elites view unarmed opposition as ineffective.¹³⁷ True power in the Central African Republic rests with the president and his ministers.

Since there is no institution to check the president even to this day, the personal use of state funds and other corrupt practices are rampant. Perhaps nowhere is this better exemplified than through the concessionary fees leveled against private firms to operate in the country. The Central African government bestows on the firms the right to extract natural resources in exchange for millions of dollars.¹³⁸ In 2011, for example, a Chinese oil firm signed an oil exploration deal with the government worth 25 million USD.¹³⁹ Firms typically also agree to splitting any future profits from their operations with the

¹³⁴ Alistair Cole, "The Presidential Party and the Fifth Republic," *West European Politics* 16, no. 2 (Dec 1993), Accessed on 25 August 2017: DOI: 10.1080/01402389308424960, 67

¹³⁵ Richard Jackson, "Violent Internal Conflict and the African State: Toward a Framework of Analysis," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 20, no. 1 (Aug 2002), 41.

¹³⁶ International Crisis Group, "Anatomy of a Phantom State,," 4.

¹³⁷ Mehler, "Rebels and Parties," 123.

¹³⁸ In the Central African Republic, the main ones are diamonds, rough lumber, gold. See: African Development Bank, *African Statistical Yearbook: 2016*, Abuja, Nigeria, 2016, 126.

¹³⁹ Stephen W. Smith, "The Elite's Road to Riches in a Poor Country," in *Making Sense of the Central African Republic*, eds. Tatiana Carayannis and Louisa Lombard (London, UK: Zed Books, 2015), 119.

government, ensuring these fees are more than one-time payments. If not directly handled by the president, then the overseers of these contracts are those whose loyalty cannot be questioned, which usually means a family member. In a country as poor as the Central African Republic it is easy to see the temptation to force one's way into the president's patronage network.

Not only do concessionary contracts create economic incentives but they also create political ones that reinforce the importance of the presidency. These agreements typically ensure that the firms face few regulations or impediments to their behavior or actions. However, the firms must handle everything involved with the extraction and transportation of the desired resources. This includes obvious things like road improvement and security but also includes building hospitals for the workers and even schools for their families.¹⁴⁰ Private firms effectively run portions of the Central African Republic.¹⁴¹ This, coupled with the fact civil servants far from Bangui often are rarely paid by the state, means that enterprising elites cannot look to regional positions such as provincial governor or town mayor as a place to begin a promising career in civil service.

Instead enterprising elites look for positions in federal government in Bangui for any possibility for provincial advancement and stability. This raises the political contestation beyond the local level. And because of a lack of constitutional norms, often times this involved getting a militia together which requires mobilizing support.¹⁴² The bigger the fighting force, the more likely the elites in Bangui would take the newcomer seriously. The fighters that were available for recruitment determined what identities want-to-be-elite could use to mobilize his fighters.

Another source of economic incentivizes under the direct purview of the president were internationally donated dollars for the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of the various rebel groups that take up arms against the state. The United Nations began to take the issue seriously during the end of Patassé's regime

¹⁴⁰ Smith, "The Elite's Road to Riches in a Poor Country," 103.

¹⁴¹ Lombard, *State of Rebellion*, 24.

¹⁴² Carayannis and Lombard, "A Concluding Note," 331.

because of the frequent mutinies by the army and rebellions.¹⁴³ Though this money is not embezzled like concessionary fees (or not embezzled entirely) it is useful for both the regime and the recipients of the funds. The former gain yet another way to sure up political support of potential adversaries by bringing the rebellions into the president's patronage network. The latter get suitcases full of cash. For example, Florian Ndjadder, one elite who came from a prominent military family, successfully negotiated a payment for an armed group that later turned out not to exist. The threat that he might have armed men at his disposal was enough.¹⁴⁴ DDR payments represent yet another way for elites to expand their power and influence in the Central African Republic, but only if they are the president or in the Ministry of Defense.

These set of conditionalities have encouraged groups to force their way into patronage networks by taking up arms against the state. The benefits of "integration," as Central Africans call the process, is at a minimum a lump-sum payoff to demobilize but occasionally a positions in a government ministry or the army.¹⁴⁵ Often times, the mere threat of force is enough to prompt integration and little violence need be inflicted. Many in the upper levels of Séléka's leadership cited gaining access to state resources as the main factor motivating the rebellion.¹⁴⁶ They only committed to completely ousting Bozizé after early victories when it became apparent their side had the greater strength.¹⁴⁷ Since the government revolves around the president, access to state resources requires membership in or ownership of the president's patronage network. Often Central Africans have few alternatives to violence (or the threat of violence) to gain access. Ethnic militias may be a good starting point for forcing one's way into national politics, but fighting groups that have successfully overthrown the government were diverse coalitions that mustered more support than the government could.

¹⁴³ Lombard, Louisa, *State of Rebellion*, 153.

¹⁴⁴ Lombard, *State of Rebellion*, 138.

¹⁴⁵ Lombard, *State of Rebellion*, 60.

¹⁴⁶ International Crisis Group, "The Roots of Violence," 18.

¹⁴⁷ International Federation for Human Rights, "A Country in the Hands of Seleka War Criminals," 10.

C. RHETORIC, SIGNALING, AND ACTIONS IN THE SÉLÉKA CRISIS

The decentralized nature of both the Séléka and the anti-Balaka make it difficult to assess what their true goals were.¹⁴⁸ However, the rhetoric elites on both sides used show in the beginning days of the conflict they are following the same blue print followed by those before them. The Séléka framed themselves as Central African in an effort to win the support of southern Central Africans. Bozizé however, had to regain support multiethnic support as he had spent the previous few years pairing down his patronage network. His solution was to mobilize an identity that united the southern ethnic groups: Christianity. Despite the Séléka's efforts to present themselves as a Central African force, religious identity began to politicize and harden as Christian elites played up religious dimensions of the conflict.

The name Séléka is an interesting choice considering where the people came from in its ranks. As mentioned earlier, the name is Sango for "alliance." Yet Sango is not widely spoken in the Vagaka province; Sudanese Arabic is the most widely spoken tongue. In fact, interviews conducted by relief organizations with survivors of Séléka abuses often mention a common theme: the abusers either did not speak Sango at all or did so with heavy accents (usually associated with Arabic).¹⁴⁹ Using a Sango word to name the organization seems a purposeful decision to downplay their region's differences with southern Central Africans.

However, the choice does make sense from the perspective of the elites leading the group. At the time of his overthrow, Bozizé was not a popular man. This is evident by the ease at which the Séléka took Bangui. Which the exception of the South Africans who lost 11 soldiers, the regular army, and militias supposedly loyal to Bozizé only put up a token resistance at best.¹⁵⁰ In a scenario where few will be sad to see the dictator go, a costly mistake would be to drive others to support the regime. Leading an army largely of a different culture, religion, and language just might make people do exactly that. A

¹⁴⁸ Lombard, Louisa, *State of Rebellion*, 48.

¹⁴⁹ See Amnesty International, "Central African Republic," 26.

¹⁵⁰ Potgieter De Wet, "South Africa Sends More Troops to Central African Republic" *The Guardian*, 27 March, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/27/central-african-republic-southafrica>.

Sango name both lends legitimacy and attempts to signal the group as Central Africans, not foreign invaders.

Though there were some in the Séléka who had radical Islamic beliefs, many of the stated goals and actions of the Séléka elite suggest they intended to act in a manner similar to previous rebels-turned-government elites and not push any widespread societal changes on Central Africans. Before departing Vakaga, they stated the overwhelming majority of their goals in secular terms—most of them revolving around the underdevelopment of the northeast region of the country.¹⁵¹ Many Séléka leaders spoke of not having a seat at the table—another common refrain of armed groups throughout the Central African Republic’s history.¹⁵² Upon securing Bangui, the main goal of the Séléka, like Bozizé’s liberators before them, they seemed focused on looting and pillaging. It was yet another unfortunate but not out of the ordinary period for the citizens of Bangui. The transitional government installed by the Séléka also looked nothing out of the ordinary. When Michel Djotodia became the head of state major Séléka players received top defense, mining, and forestry positions, allowing them to in theory protect the new regime and extract resources at will. Other non-Séléka elites received posts at more minor ministries in hopes of keeping the peace.¹⁵³ All of these actions were regular occurrences for the Central African Republic, demonstrating the Séléka’s goals were not unique. The shift from ethnic to religious mobilization did not fully begin until after the Séléka was firmly in power.

The religious mobilization and violence did not begin with the Séléka, but rather with Francois Bozizé. The Séléka’s initial raid to the outskirts of Bangui in December 2012 proved that they were a serious threat to the Bozizé’s regime. The unpopularity of the regime due to years of nepotism and corruption meant he had to act fast to build support. During the uneasy peace between the Séléka and the government following the first Libreville agreement, Bozizé and his supporters began to warn the residents of

¹⁵¹ Dukhan, Nathalia, et al., “State Fragility” 5.

¹⁵² Lombard, “The Autonomous Zone Conundrum,” 149.

¹⁵³ International Federation for Human Rights, “Central African Republic,” 14.

Bangui of the threat posed by Muslims.¹⁵⁴ “We welcomed the Muslims but they have betrayed us,” said a Bangui Christian politician, drawing the connection between the Séléka and all Muslims.¹⁵⁵ They described the Séléka’s true mission as the Islamization of the country.¹⁵⁶ This was the first case of elites framing the conflict in religious terms.

Along with increased rhetoric, the Bozizé regime also began to distribute small arms to self-defense groups in and around Bangui in February and March 2013 in anticipation of the Séléka’s push south.¹⁵⁷ Many of the volunteers for these militias were youth members of Bozize’s political party but others simply hailed from Christian neighborhoods and towns.¹⁵⁸ These groups began to harass and detain local Muslims after receiving arms and warnings about their supposed sympathies towards the Séléka.¹⁵⁹ Any complaints lodged by Muslim Central Africans to the police or the army fell on deaf ears. A number of Muslims were detained, some of whom were murdered.¹⁶⁰ This sent terror through the Muslim community. Barricades were erected on the edges of Muslim neighborhoods of the Bangui. When the Séléka arrived in the capitol a few weeks later, thousands of Muslims residents were ready to join the ranks, regardless of their leaderships’ desire to paint themselves as a secular force.¹⁶¹

Similar to their Séléka counterparts, the leaders of the anti-Balaka movement may have used their name to send a signal as well. The name is often described as an amalgamation of the Sango word for bullet and AK—as in AK-47. However, “Balaka” in the Gbaya language means machete.¹⁶² Either translation sends a similar signal. Many Séléka fighters carry Kalashnikov rifles and some of the most gruesome attacks on

¹⁵⁴ Kilembe, “Local Dynamics in the Pk5 District of Bangui,” 97.

¹⁵⁵ International Crisis Group, “Roots of Violence,” 20.

¹⁵⁶ Mark Morrison, *Central African Republic: Governance and Political Conflict* (Victoria, B.C.: Victoria General Printing, 2017), ioc. 1202 of 2423, Kindle Edition.

¹⁵⁷ Smith, “CAR’s History,” 34.

¹⁵⁸ Amnesty International, “Central African Republic,” 15.

¹⁵⁹ Kilembe, “Local Dynamics in the Pk5 District of Bangui,” 96.

¹⁶⁰ Kilembe, “Local Dynamics in the Pk5 District of Bangui,” 96.

¹⁶¹ Kilembe, “Local Dynamics in the Pk5 District of Bangui,” 96.

¹⁶² Lombard, *State of Rebellion*, 18.

civilians were done with machetes. The “anti” portion of the name implies a defensive nature to the group. Recalling both the Séléka’s atrocities and suggesting the anti-Balaka are defenders, help frame the Séléka as the aggressor and instigator of the violence.

This aggressive, foreigner frame mirrors much of what was said about Séléka by Christian Central Africans during and after the Séléka crisis. For example, it became common for the Christian of Bangui to refer to the months seven months that the Séléka was in power as the “rizzia.” Before this, the term was used to describe slave raids committed by Muslim raiders from the north.¹⁶³ Despite many Christians stating their only concern was dangerous foreign influences, “no more mosques in CAR” was spray painted on Islamic community centers and Muslim-owned businesses throughout Muslim quarters of the city.¹⁶⁴ The elites framing of the conflict as an invasion of foreign Muslims began to reflect in the actions of the masses.

The Séléka crisis saw the mobilization of religious identity in the Central African Republic for the first time. However, it did not begin until after the Séléka captured the government. The corruption of the Bozizé isolated it from the majority of southerners, leaving it vulnerable to the Séléka. In order to gain support, the regime had to isolate the Séléka from any southern support. Since the Séléka’s leadership recruited from their Muslim-majority home region, religion was a convenient tool to do so. Without Bozizé, it is unlikely that religion would have ever politicized.

D. MOBILIZING SINCE THE SÉLÉKA’S DEPARTURE FROM POWER

In January of 2014, Catherine Samba-Panza, the Christian Mayor of Bangui, and Mahamat Kamoun, a Muslim and former cabinet member under both Bozizé and Djotodia, were elected as President and Prime Minister respectively by the parliament (and, importantly, with the acceptance of former Séléka leaders).¹⁶⁵ The logic laid out in this thesis would predict that if a government made up of members of both religious

¹⁶³ International Crisis Group, “The Roots of Violence,” 19.

¹⁶⁴ Lombard, *State of Rebellion*, 185.

¹⁶⁵ Mark Cardwell, “New CAR Premier Kamoun: ‘We Must All Work for Peace,’” November 08, 2014, *Deutsche Welle*, <http://www.dw.com/en/new-car-premier-kamoun-we-must-all-work-for-peace/a-17846314>.

groups were installed than the incentive to mobilize religious identity would be removed. Despite some under currents of sectarian tensions and violence that remained to this day, the salience of religion has notably decreased since the Séléka crisis. This section discusses mobilization techniques since the end of the Djotodia regime.

The Séléka never achieved much unity but the group began splintering in late 2013 when President Djotodia disbanded the group. Despite Djotodia's announcement, few ex-Séléka heeded his call and returned home. Fighting between the various factions (and against the anti-Balaka) began almost immediately. The groups reflected their pre-Séléka makeup with the lines falling largely along regional and ethnic lines. Three of the largest groups, the Rassemblement Patriotique pour le Renouveau de la Centrafrique (RPRC), the Front Populaire pour la Reniasance de la Centrafrique (FPRC), and the Mouvement Patriotique Centrafricain (MPC), are all comprised of fighters from the northeastern Central African Republic and southeastern Chad and formed an alliance. Their members are from the Runga, Gula, and Salamat ethnic groups.¹⁶⁶ The other predominantly Muslim militias that these groups clash with are comprised of Muslims from Bangui and members of the Fulani ethnic group, a semi-nomadic ethnic group that resides in the western portion of the country. This new fighting highlights the fact that the events of the Séléka crisis were more about elites finding new paths to power than any change in religious attitudes.

The Christian anti-Balaka networks mobilized during the crisis also went through a similar fracturing. Like their ex-Séléka counterparts, Christian groups largely fractured along ethnic and regional lines. Many of the groups have ties to politicians who served in cabinets prior to the Séléka takeover. At least two groups have direct ties to former presidents Ange-Felix Patassé and Francois Bozizé.¹⁶⁷ Inter-Christian alliances can be predicted by which cabinets the leader formerly served in. Those that had positions in Patassé's regime are more likely to band amongst themselves and former Bozizé regime figures are more likely to do the same. This jockeying for position within the Christian

¹⁶⁶ Nathalia Dukhan, "Splintered Warfare: Alliances, Affiliations, and Agendas of Armed Factions and Politico-Military Groups in the Central African Republic," Enough Project, accessed 10 August, 2017, 5–9, https://enoughproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/SplinteredWarfare_August2017_Enough_final.pdf

¹⁶⁷ Dukahn, "Splintered Warfare," 18.

community suggests that the Christian identity was used as a unifying tool when Christian elites were all thrown from power but did not take deep roots.

Not only are there new alliances within religious communities in the Central African Republic but there are so alliances of convenience between religious communities. In October 2016, the FPRC, RPRC, and the MPC allied with a pro-Bozizé Anti-Balaka group.¹⁶⁸ The Coalition, as it is referred to, brought together leaders who committed some of the worst atrocities on both sides during the Séléka crisis. It also is the largest force outside of the government and because it controls a number of mining sites has the largest war chest of any armed group.¹⁶⁹ This union between former rivals is perhaps the best evidence that elites altered their strategies following the installation of a unity government.

This is not to say that sectarian violence in the Central African Republic. Samba-Panza and Kamoun used their inauguration to call on both sides to put their weapons.¹⁷⁰ These appeals too fell on deaf ears as a few days later a Christian mob rioted in a Muslim neighborhood of Bangui, killing two Muslims whose bodies were burned in a traffic circle.¹⁷¹ Only a few dozen mosques remain in the country compared to hundreds before the conflict. Similarly, the number of refugees fleeing the Central African Republic, the overwhelming majority of them Muslim, has only increased since the Séléka's 2014 departure.¹⁷² Elites may have moved on from religious identity but there does appear to be an undercurrent of sectarian tensions and violence as a result of the mobilization during the Séléka crisis.

¹⁶⁸ Dukahn, "Splintered Warfare," 26.

¹⁶⁹ Dukahn, "Splintered Warfare," 27.

¹⁷⁰ Mark Cardwell, "New CAR Premier Kamoun: 'We Must All Work for Peace,'" November 08, 2014, *Deutsche Welle*, <http://www.dw.com/en/new-car-premier-kamoun-we-must-all-work-for-peace/a-17846314>.

¹⁷¹ "Central African Republic MPs elect Catherine Samba-Panza" BBC, January 20, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-25811250>.

¹⁷² Human Rights Watch, "Central African Republic."

E. CONCLUSION

Years of corruption, underdevelopment, and violence have created powerful incentives in the Central African Republic for elites to use extralegal means to gain position and power. Elites in the Central African Republic mobilized different identities in different times. The logic of which identity to mobilize when was a simple one. When they needed to draw on support to gain power they mobilized identities that allowed for wider recruitment. When they were in power and wanted to use the country's political system for financial gain, elites fell back on ethnicity to make more efficient patronage networks. During the Séléka crisis, the leaders of the Séléka attempted to frame group as Central African but were rhetorically cut off by southern elites who effectively mobilized religion. As the logic of this thesis would predict, when a regime that represented both religions came into office, elites largely abandoned religious mobilization in favor of ethnic and regional identities.

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V. CONCLUSION

This thesis began with the question: why did Central Africans prioritize religious identity over ethnic identity during the Séléka crisis? This thesis researched a number of possibilities, from the agendas of domestic and foreign political to mass-level tensions and demographic changes. This chapter first summarizes the main arguments in the previous chapters. Next, it discusses implications of this work on theoretical and practical levels. Then it will make suggestions for future research. Finally, it provides this thesis' relevance for the United States Department of Defense.

A. FINDINGS

This thesis argues that the prioritization of religious identity over ethnic identity among Central Africans is an example of an elite-driven identity change. After being driven from power, southern political elites mobilized Christianity in response to the Séléka takeover because it was an identity the majority of southern Central African could rally behind. Furthermore, Christianity isolated the Séléka from any southern support as the group was overwhelming Muslim. Finally, mobilizing Christianity helped frame the Séléka as foreign invaders because it played into a narrative common that in order to be a true Central African, one must be Christian.

The reason this mobilization is unique in the Central Africa Republic's history is that southern political elites had dominated the political landscape since independence. The overwhelming majority of southern Central Africans are Christian. Mobilizing Christianity against other southerners would not have been effective. Instead, southern political elites choose to mobilize ethnicity. In fact, the leaders of the Séléka did not initially attempt to mobilize around their religion; instead they tried to present themselves as a Central African group. Only when the Séléka took power was it advantageous for southern political elites to mobilize their religious identity.

The speed at which elites successfully mobilized the masses points to the existence of underlying tensions at the mass-level. These tensions stem from socio-economic differences. There are two main causes of these difference. The first are

customs that date back before the colonial era. Muslims tend to be involved in trading networks that originate in the Arab world, while Christians tend to farm land. The second is the geography the Central African Republic that largely isolates the majority of the country's Muslim population in the northeast region. However, these frictions rarely erupted beyond the personal or local levels because the identity lacked political salience.

International factors did not appear to play a significant role in the identity shift. Though Chadian President Idriss Déby was the Séléka's benefactor, he chose to back them based on their capabilities and not their faith. Furthermore, his earlier support of Bozizé's coup also suggests Déby had little concerns about the religion of his beneficiaries. Déby's role in bringing a Muslim group to power for the first time in the Central African Republic was an incidental side effect of his efforts to maintain leverage and influence over the head of state on Chad's southern border.

Similarly, research for the thesis found little impact Wahhabi preachers or other foreign religious organizations on the shift from religious to ethnic identity. Religious organizations with particularly dogmatic beliefs are present in the Central African Republic. While they likely incited some individuals to join either the Séléka or the anti-Balaka, they do not as of now have systemic influence throughout the country. Like the influence of Idriss Déby, these factors are intervening variables in the explaining the shift of identity in the Central African Republic.

B. IMPLICATIONS

This work has a number of implications for the field of ethnic studies. First, the Séléka crisis reinforces the importance of understanding the balance-of-power between identity groups when discussing identity changes. This factor is important to the analysis given by Brass, Fearon and Laitin, and Todd in their works on identity shifts. When the Séléka swept to power, the group completely changed power dynamics in the country even though they did not initially mobilize specifically around their Muslim identity. A principally Muslim group taking power, forced Christian elites to recalibrate their mobilization strategies. This case suggests that it might be the most important factor when analyzing identity shifts.

A second implication of this thesis is the seemingly non-importance of external factors. This is interesting in today's political climate where the concerns about the influence of everything from Russian interference in American and European elections to the supposed dangers of Sharia law creeping into western society. This thesis suggests that those influences are not as important as they seem. Existing power structures and intercommunal relations a better predictor of social harmony than external influences.

C. FUTURE RESEARCH

This thesis brings forth three topics that warrant future study. This thesis noted both that violence has a hardening effect on identities and that the interreligious violence continues to this day, especially in the rural parts of the country. The violence continues despite the efforts to halt it undertaken by the international community and the current Central African government. It is possible that the unprecedented level of violence seen during the Séléka crisis harden religious identity to the point it is the primary identity for years to come. This research could first further explore the lasting effects of violence on identity shifts. It could also study the effectiveness of elites in resetting identity shifts. Researching this hypothesis will likely require widespread survey data which will not be attainable until hostilities end.

Relatedly, the role of telecommunications and social media on conflict-based identity shifts warrants further study. Perhaps it is not the level of violence seen during the Séléka crisis that is keeping Central African elites from putting the pieces back together. It may be the level of information available to the masses. Certainly Central Africans knew previous coups and political instability resulted in violence. However, there is likely a difference between hearing about intercommunal violence and seeing the results of it firsthand.

Another avenue for study could be to apply the balance-of-power lens to a case of nonviolent political turnover. To a certain extent, fears over a real or perceived shift in the balance-of-power between different communities is understandable when the balance shifts violently. It might be different in a democracy where intercommunal relations should be stronger. It would be interesting to apply this lens to the present situation in the

United States or Ireland where citizens of a minority ethnic group recently held chief executive posts. This thesis would suggest that there would be consolidation and mobilization of the ethnic majority group in each country.

D. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

There are two important lessons for the Department of Defense to learn from the Séléka crisis. First, it is vital to understand the role elites play in intercommunal violence. Losing sight of this fact often leads to incorrect understandings of conflict which in turn leads to implementing the wrong solutions. Some outside observers framed the Séléka crisis as an example of primordial hatreds between two groups that can never live peacefully. This is far from the truth. Solutions to mediate a crisis created by political elites will be vastly different than those to a crisis revolving around supposed ancient hatreds. Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, sectarian violence led many policymakers pushed to divide the country three ways. Iraq's largest religious groups, it was argued, could not possibly live together peacefully. Yet much of the violence was stirred up by former Ba'ath Party members. Domestic political elites can often be useful tools cooling intercommunal tensions and should not be cast aside.

Similarly, the Department of Defense should always be skeptical when host nation political elites warn of Islamic extremist groups. In the post-9/11 world, an easy way to gain access to U.S. military support and funding is to request assistance in combating violent extremism. As this thesis has shown, domestic elites can manipulate society in a manner that exacerbates sectarian differences for their personal gain. This is not to say that all reported instances of violent extremist groups are inaccurate. However, it behooves the Department of Defense to independently verify the reports.

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